VETERANS AND SENIORS COMMITTEE

OF THE

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

MINUTES

A meeting of the Veterans and Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Maxine Postal Legislative Auditorium of the Evans K. Griffing Building, 300 Center Drive, Riverhead, New York, on May 3, 2016.

Members Present:
Legislator Steven Stern - Chairman
Legislator Tom Barraga - Vice-Chair
Legislator Sarah Anker
Legislator Lou D'Amaro
Legislator Monica Martinez
Legislator Leslie Kennedy

Also In Attendance:
George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature
Sarah Simpson - Assistant Counsel/Legislature
Amy Ellis - Chief Deputy Clerk
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veteran's Services
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director of Office for the Aging
Debbie Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern
Robert Lipp - Director, Budget Review Office
Ben Zwirn - Suffolk Community College
Katie Horst - County Executive's Office
Michael Pitcher - Director of Communications/PO
Ali Nazir - Aide to Legislator Kennedy
Justin Littell - Aide to Legislator D'Amaro
Allison Puglia - Island Harvest
Rick Brand - Newsday
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken By:
Gabrielle Severs - Court Stenographer

Minutes Transcribed By:
Denise Weaver - Legislative Aide

(THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 10:07 AM)

VICE-CHAIRWOMAN ANKER:
Welcome to the Veterans Committee. Please rise for the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Kennedy.

Salutation

Please remain standing for a moment of silent meditation and prayer as we think of those in our military protecting our freedom.

Moment of Silence Observed

Thank you.

Director Ronayne, would you like to present this morning? Before we get started, is there anyone in the audience that would like to speak or that have cards? No, I do not see anybody. Okay. Director Ronayne.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Good morning. As always, thank you for the invitation. I need longer arms this morning.

MR. LIPP:
This one works better, if you'd like it.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Is this okay? Very honestly, I have little to report on this morning other than some important upcoming events. I would like to, firstly, remind each of you invitations did go out in yesterday's mail so you'll each be receiving invitations, but on Saturday, May 21st at 11:00 a.m. we will be hosting our annual Armed Forces Day ceremony that is held at the Armed Forces Plaza directly on the north side of the Dennison Building. We're very excited this year we have a very special speaker this year, some of you may be familiar with Father Charles Fink, now Monsignor Fink. Father Fink is a well-known fixture in the veterans community, not only on Long Island but throughout the nation, and in addition to his many other noteworthy accomplishments, Monsignor Fink is a Vietnam Veteran himself. Long before he entered the priesthood, he served as an infantryman in Vietnam, and toward the end or at the end of his service in Vietnam, he authored a poem by the name of *Bury Me With Soldiers*, a very well-known poem. In fact, at the Northport VA Medical Center there is a park known as the "Wall of Wars" where they have a series of monuments memorializing all of the actions that our nation has participated in, and as a part of that park there's a granite slab -- I would say it's 10 feet tall by 8 foot wide -- and this poem is actually etched into the face of this granite slab for all who visit the park to read. It's very moving, certainly, from the perspective of a veteran. It's very moving. So we're very excited that Father Fink will be our speaker, and I would look forward hopefully to seeing many of you in attendance with us on that day.

The second event that we have scheduled will be on May -- I'm sorry, June 17th and that is the annual Korean War Veterans Ceremony. That is always a very well-attended event. We're delighted to have a number of representatives from the Korean War Veterans community. They do

a terrific job of enlisting support from representative governments who continue to work closely with the veterans of the Korean War on programs year-round, but we typically expect representatives from the United Nations, from the South Korean government, the Turkish government, very often the Australian government, so it's an interesting program. It's a lot of fun and you can certainly speak after session, I'm sure, to either Legislator Kennedy or Comptroller Kennedy and they will attest to the high quality of the barbecue and the festivities after the event, so if we don't see you at the event I certainly hope we see you for dinner afterward. That also takes place at Armed Forces Plaza, that will be 6:00 p.m. on Friday June 17th.

Finally, I'd like to just remind each of you, again, on June 11th we will be hosting our third annual Day of Family Wellness and that is the Joseph Dwyer program's annual effort to engage our larger community. We would certainly love to have as many veterans and attendants as possible. The intent of this activity is really to engage and make contact with family members and loved ones whether they are close family members, professional colleagues, anybody in the veterans circle to expose them to so many of the services and opportunities that are offered through the Dwyer Program. We've had so much success over the past several years engaging in things, you know, in very nontraditional, certainly in the veteran's world, very nontraditional modalities, things such as Reiki and acupuncture, yoga, Tai Chi. We're doing drum circles. So many of these, what I would have looked upon as nontraditional and probably unlikely to find strong support in the veterans community, they have been received overwhelmingly and I'm delighted to say that veterans who participate in these activities, we're seeing very interesting results. We're seeing veterans who have been prescribed long-term medications for a variety of ailments, both physical and psychological, who have trended away from their meds, and we're working very closely with VA. In fact, the program has become so successful that we recently met with leadership at the VA, and we are planning a schedule to begin meetings on the campus at the Northport VA so we're evolved from beyond Northport referring to our program to actually hosting the program on the campus.

Their mental health leadership has embraced the value and the significance of the accomplishments of this program and I, to their credit, I think that having taken several years, we're four years into the program now, they have patiently waited for the program to evolve and to mature and to demonstrate that it wasn't an anomaly, it didn't appear and disappear that we've got some -- we've established in the community at this point, the program has some credibility and, as I said, it has now matured enough in the community that we can look to accomplishments and speak intelligently to the value of so much of what the program is accomplishing and continues to attempt to accomplish.

So with that, I will happily take any questions.

VICE-CHAIRWOMAN ANKER:
I have a couple of questions. You know, last year, year before, you know, we're always addressing the issue of locating the military folks and trying to help them. Have we made any progress as far as identifying them -- identifying them through, you know, our government list cause I know there's an issue of privacy and security. Where are we with that?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
We continue to work with the Federal and the State government. There is a list that we're allowed access to once per year, the name -- it's the RONA list, R-O-N-A, Record of Name and Address. We are permitted as a governmental partner, we're permitted to apply or request that list once annually. That typically takes place in January or early February, we're still waiting for the 2015 list to -- to appear for us. It's always a year behind. It's an important tool, it's a helpful tool, but I will also tell you that when we have done mass mailings against this list the returns on the mailings typically run north of 70%. The Record of Name and Address list that DOD shares with us actually is the

record of name and address of the service member upon entry into service. I'm not sure why they can't, you know, communicate internally and release the same information relative to the separation from service but the information that we've been receiving appears to be at time of entry into service so the longer somebody has served the more likely it is that that information is not as -- as accurate as we would like. Thirty percent is still better than no percent so we're -- we're delighted to be able to communicate and engage the veterans that we do reach through that list, but it is a smaller capture than we would like.

VICE-CHAIRWOMAN ANKER:
Right, but you'd think as a government agency, here we are, we're Suffolk County, that we should have the ability to obtain information as soon as those men and women get off that plane or off that ship, wherever they're coming from, you know, back from their military service, we should be able to provide all this information that you have, you have it Tom, we have it here and it's very frustrating because when you go to folks, you know, veterans that, you know, have not been in service for a while and they don't know that they can get a discount or rebate off their property taxes because they were in the service, a lot of them, a lot of folks don't know that and it's great, again, what you're doing and providing that information, but I just wish our Federal government could help us connect the dots and really create a stronger network of support that's so desperately need.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Well, I appreciate that and we do continue to try, we do work with our federal partners, unfortunately, you know, at all levels of government we do have our limitations and, you know, we'll continue to engage as we are able.

Beyond the RONA list I will say that our local medical center, the Northport VA and to a greater -- to a lesser extent, the VISN, the Veterans Integrated Service Network, which is the -- the metropolitan area, are very good about including information upon our request when they do mailings into the community and obviously VA has a better database than we do but for a multitude of HIPA and privacy reasons they are unable to share those except or until such time as we share a veteran in common, once that happens then we can cross -- we can cross communicate, but when we have information that we would like to get out into the community, they've been very supportive about providing room in their mailings to include information about our programs and honestly we have a -- we've been very successful in our outreach efforts going into the community and extending the word of what is available through Suffolk County.

VICE-CHAIRWOMAN ANKER:
Okay. Legislator Barraga has a question for you.

LEG. BARRAGA:
Not really a question just sort of a conversation. First of all, let me congratulate you and Dr. Spencer on that veterans breakfast yesterday, it was -- I think better than 200 veterans showed up and it was extremely worthwhile and very beneficial and I'm sure they appreciated it as well as the honorees, you did a great job, both of you.

You know, as I sat there yesterday at the breakfast something has been sort of going around in mind for some time now in terms of veterans organizations, for example, I wonder if we've reached a point where because it's so difficult and challenging for these different veterans organizations to get younger veterans to join, the clout that these individual veterans groups have is beginning to dissipate because their membership continues to either stay level or slightly dim. I'm just wondering if we've reached a point in this country where we take a group like the American Legion or AMVETS or Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Jewish War Veterans and combine them into one huge

organization. I think if you -- if the talks are -- it would not be easy to do because there's politics in each one of these groups, but the reality is if you were to combine all of these veterans organizations into one large organization, their political clout in Washington and the various states would increase dramatically. At the same time they may be able to market themselves as a single organization to get more younger veterans to join. I mean, I remember as you probably remember, for many years in this country you had the American Federation of Labor, I think you had the CIO, the Congress of Industrial Organizations, they were two separate organizations, huge organizations, very complicated, but they operated in separate theaters, often they didn't even get along. In the 1950's they finally came to the conclusion if we want to be heavy hitters at the national level, they combined, they merged, that's why you had the AFL-CIO. If they can do it, these veterans organizations can put their local politics aside on a national level and combine, I think they'd be much more effective at this point because right now you read about different posts that are closing, financially they're having problems, each one has their own magazines, their own promotions, but the reality is I think that discussion has to start at this point if you want to have a future. Like at the breakfast yesterday, Tom, you know, there were two tables of veterans in wheelchairs, most of the other tables, these gentlemen were in their 60's and 70's and 80's. You don't see the growth, the growth isn't there, a lot of them -- there's a few World War II veterans left and a lot of them were Korean War veterans, some Vietnam veterans, but not too many veterans from the recent wars we've had. So it may be time where this discussion has to open up in terms of combining the various veterans group to have one strong, potent, effective, national veterans organization.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
I think to your point that there's been some recognition of that, and, by the way, I want to thank you, it was a pleasure to spend time with you yesterday at the breakfast.

There has been some recognition of the point that you make. We're seeing increasing when matters of and, I guess, we can in varying degrees we can prioritize the legislative priorities of the various organizations, when there are issues that they, commonly amongst themselves agree to be priorities, the trend has been that the leadership of the three larger organizations, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion and the Disabled American Veterans, the national commanders have been signing joint letters when they submit legislation, when they testify and when they advocate. Ten years ago that was not the case. So we're seeing a recognition to your point on -- in terms of them collaborating on their submissions. It will be a heavy lift for these folks whoever, you know, surrender their silos and come together, you know, collectively for, you know, to create one main organization.

I agree you. There has been a lot of difficulty in recruiting our returning service members into these organizations for a variety of reasons; different economies, different social structures, there's been a shift toward, you know, how people are serving today. I was having a discussion earlier this morning that historically the -- the nature of service was, you know, we used to refer to it back in our day as one-and-done. A lot of deployments, most of the deployments were one deployment to a theater, you would return home and largely that would be the extent of your combat or overseas deployments for the majority of service members. Today we're seeing this phenomenon of multiple deployments and service members are spending less time at home. They tend to come home, they spend a period of time then they're reactivated, they redeploy and they're not engaging with the -- the veteran service organizations to the extent that they once were, they become more engaged in family and family career.

So there have been a number of concerns but the legislative might of all of these organizations is based on their membership and the memberships are across the board declining in all of them so it's an important -- it's an important issue, I do believe that they've recognized it because they have

begun to sign these -- these joint letters, but the evolution of that I wouldn't hazard a guess, I would imagine it would be quite some time before they begin to have a discussion about, you know, seating territory and coming together for a common purpose.

LEG. BARRAGA:
It's just that, sooner or later, they're going to begin to realize that there's a much greater sensitivity on the part of elected officials at all levels of government, when they're dealing with one organization you might have 30 million members versus five or six organizations that have a million or two million as far as membership. I mean, just take a look at this ongoing national disgrace in terms of the VA system on a nationwide basis. I would think that if you had one solid organization with 20 or 25 million veterans coming into Washington raising hell, there'd be a lot more positive quicker reaction than just a spewing of several different groups coming in at different times and maybe it would of had a much more positive effect on this ongoing situation at the VA.

You know, it's something I think that should be put on the table and taken a look at predicated on all of the other elements that are going on in these different organizations. Maybe it's just -- it's just time, it's just time that they combine their efforts into one huge solid veterans organization, I think for many upside benefits. The downside is the political turf of each one of these groups, I understand that, I understand it, you know, but that has to be put aside for the greater good. All right. Thank you.

VICE-CHAIRWOMAN ANKER:
Okay, Tom. Thank you so much.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Thank you.

VICE-CHAIRWOMAN ANKER:
Okay. We have Allison Puglia. She's the vice president of programs and agency relations at Island Harvest. Welcome. And we're going to discuss Operation HOPE Program. It's a mobile food pantry for veterans.

MS. PUGLIA:
Thank you for this opportunity to speak with all of you today, and special thanks to Legislator Stern for the invitation and the continued support.

Island Harvest is the largest food bank on Long Island serving 316,000 people each year. We provide food and services to more than 150,000 Suffolk County residents alone. Our services started over 20 years ago with the mission to end hunger. We have been successful in distributing millions of pounds of food each year. Last year alone we distributed over four million pounds of food to the most vulnerable communities in Suffolk County. We are thankful for all the support we receive from Suffolk County, with the support we are able to reach families as far east as Greenport and as far west as Farmingdale.

Island Harvest Food Bank offers many programs that serve multiple populations including children, seniors and veterans. Today I would like to share details about our Operation HOPE, which is our mobile food pantry for veterans.

In 2011 we established this program because we saw a need to serve people who have given their lives for our country. Long Island has one of the largest populations of veterans in the United States. In the beginning we trained veteran volunteers who are aware of the culture built within the ranks of the military services members. Now, staff driven, we are able to meet with other

veterans in the privacy of their homes while establishing their natural camaraderie of serving their country. During the visit the veterans are provided with a month's supply of food to help them through difficult times. Each visit also includes a conversation directing them to local resources such as housing, health, financial literacy, employment and other services. Since 2011 we have served more than 400 veterans and their family members each year. Over 1000 veterans and their families in total have been helped. Our coordinator, who's also a veteran, is thoroughly versed on the services available to the veterans in the community. This year we have redesigned the program to offer a continuation of services that extends for three months. With a minimum of 60 veterans per month, he provides enough food and product that allows them to redirect their money towards other expenses. Island Harvest offers -- understands the importance of networking and building partnerships. We work with a multitude of community organizations who make referrals to our programs and provide care to the veterans we serve. The expansion of our program allows us to visit two community organizations each month that serve veterans. We bring our mobile food pantry to them meeting with at least 15 veterans per visit. At that same time a community organization attends to offer their specialized services.

One of our veterans shared a story involving many hardships. He enlisted in the military to provide a bright future for his family, he left his child, wife and his disabled veteran -- parents at home. They were dependent on him for financial support, his tour of service was during Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. After only two years of service he was medically discharged, he was not connected to the VA due to poor guidance upon discharge. While trying to navigate services independently, he was unsuccessful and spent several days sleeping on park benches with his family. This did not bring him down, he continued a diligent search for employment. He persevered and landed a position in construction. This was still not enough money to support his family. He was connected to Operation Hope through another veteran organization and was able to utilize our services while he got back on his feet. The money they saved on food allowed them to save to pay the deposit on safe and secure housing. These are many -- some of the many services offered at Island Harvest and we are committed to helping veterans and their families and look forward to working with all of you to help more veterans in need.

So I provided a copy of our annual report and there's a also a flyer with my business card on it. We are serving 60 veterans a month so we do accept all kinds of referrals, if you know somebody or if you just want to send it around to the veterans that you are aware of, there's always somebody that could use the service but doesn't want to reach out to be able to ask for it. Our veteran who is running -- who is coordinating the program, he came back from service in South Korea and when he came back he also was not connected so he's been through VetsBuild, Beacon House and a few other services to help him get through so he's fully aware of all of the difficulties to navigate so he's able to help. So these are just some of the ways that we can help people feel comfortable when reaching out.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Very good. Allison, well, thank you and thank you for being with us today and thank you for your leadership here and, you know, I know in my office I know many of my colleagues have had the opportunity to work with Island Harvest for many, many years and have done some really great things together so thank you for being with us. This is important information.

My question is where -- this goes to who? This goes to where? And how does the organization find veterans and their families who are in need of your assistance.

MS. PUGLIA:
So we use a lot of our partnerships. We have our membership of agencies so we have about 450 active members, which are food pantries, soup kitchens, shelters, other places and they're all -- all

in contact with veterans. Some are full veteran organizations such as Beacon House or the -- the Clubhouse of Suffolk, but there are many organizations that have one or two veterans that trickle in so we take referrals from them, but also just anybody who knows somebody, we want to be able to connect them.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
One of the most important aspects is that those that are delivering the food or veterans themselves and so that type of a peer-to-peer program as well all know is most effective. Legislator Krupski.

LEG. KRUPSKI:
Good morning. I see -- you know, I was looking through the information you passed out here to us this morning. Is there a -- and you're using veterans to distribute the food, but I notice a lot of the contributors are Long Island farms and when you're in the middle of the season producing the food, the last thing you can do is also distribute the food because it's just -- when you donate it, and a lot of these farms donate food, it's a matter of coordinating with Island Harvest to get to the food to the people who need it. Is there any way that you could use this, this component of your organization to collect food from the farms also in season when it's really a difficult time for the farms themselves to -- cause you're not dealing with like a canned good that can sit there for a week, is there any way to coordinate that to get a better, you know, to better service with the farms?

MS. PUGLIA:
So we currently employ a produce sourcer and so her role is actually to go out into the community and work with the farmers, some of them actually grow extra rows for us so they are able to plant and seed and cultivate that land for us and then we actually have volunteers that go out. They could be a Boy Scout troop, a civic association or just other people in the community who want to help. They've rescued thousands and thousands of pounds of food. Last year alone, she brought in with her programming 500,000 pounds of food, and all of that food would just have been kind of put back into the soil, and so we use our agencies and our other programs to be able to distribute that food out.

LEG. KRUPSKI:
So how is this gleaning program made known to the producers?

MS. PUGLIA:
So because we have a strong presence with the Long Island Farm Bureau and we are already purchasing food from them at a very reduced rate we work with them and let them know about these programs and she does a lot of education to also grow community gardens so in that way she's educating churches, and other organizations who are willing to grow locally in their own backyard.

LEG. KRUPSKI:
Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Legislator Barraga.

LEG. BARRAGA:
Hi, good morning. Just taking a look at your financial statement, I just have a question maybe you can give some sort of a detailed explanation on supporting revenue. I noticed that between 2013 and 2014 for support and revenue you're down about -- it looks about seven and-a-half million dollars from the previous year. Specifically, I guess, food donations seem to be down, other grants seem to be down, I mean, obviously you're facing some challenges here.

MS. PUGLIA:
Well, when you look at it it does sound really bad. But, Sandy, Hurricane Sandy came in 2012 and so we are considered a disaster relief organization and so we're able to respond to disasters whether it could be a fire in a local community or as large as Sandy was so we received three or four billion dollars from Red Cross alone to be able to respond to that and that's not a reoccurring grant because it was just to respond so because of that it did put a --

LEG. BARRAGA:
So 2013 was sort of an anomaly in terms of the total growth; all right. So that's what the 19-5 or 20 million is, about the norm?

MS. PUGLIA:
That's correct.

LEG. BARRAGA:
All right. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Okay. Everybody good?

MS. PUGLIA:
Let me just make one more comment about Operation Hope. The program does not require any kind of financial checks or any checks based on the military discharge, which is valuable because it is difficult to engage in programs when they don't accept people with certain discharge statuses. So we do help people based on their just verbal statement of need.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
All right, very good. Well, thank you. Thank you for being with us today and thank you for the information. And I know my colleagues will want more copies that we can display in our district offices so that there's information that's readily available to members of the public and particularly the veterans and others in our community that -- that you look to serve, that we all look to serve. Very important information and important to continue to have it on display and so that it is a constant reminder to anybody that we have the opportunity to work with that's coming into our offices that hunger remains an issue on Long Island for so many of our neighbors and it's not just a particular time of year, but all year round. All right. Thank you.

MS. PUGLIA:
I can e-mail that flyer out to whoever so that you can just circulate it in that way as well.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Thank you.

Okay, we then have -- going to the tabled resolution.

Tabled Resolution

It is ***1007 - Adopting Local Law No. -2016, A Local Law to provide designated parking for veterans at County facilities. (Muratore)***
This public hearing is reopened and so this needs to be tabled for purpose of a public hearing so I make a motion to table for a purpose of a public hearing, second by Legislator Anker. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? IR 1007 stands tabled for purpose of the public hearing. ***Tabled***

for Public Hearing (VOTE: 6-0-0-0)

There being no other business before the committee this morning, we are adjourned.

(THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 10:37 AM)