

VETERANS COMMITTEE
OF THE
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE
MINUTES

A meeting of the Veterans Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, 725 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on June 14, 2016.

Members Present:

Legislator Steve Stern - Chairman
Legislator Sarah Anker - Vice-Chair
Legislator Monica Martinez
Legislator Tom Barraga
Legislator Lou D'Amaro
Legislator Leslie Kennedy

Also in Attendance:

Legislator Kate Browning - Legislative District No. 3
Sarah Simpson - Counsel/Suffolk County Legislature
Amy Ellis - Chief Deputy Clerk/Suffolk County Legislature
Justin Littell - Aide to Legislator D'Amaro
Ali Nazir - Aide to Legislator Kennedy
Debbie Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern
Andrew Tarantowicz - Budget Review Office
John Marafino - County Executive's Office
Tom Ronayne - Director/Veterans Service Agency
Dori Scofield - Paws of War
John Cuoney - Commander/Northport American Legion
Don McKay
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken By:

Gabrielle Severs - Court Stenographer

Minutes Transcribed By:

Kim Castiglione - Legislative Secretary

*(*The meeting was called to order at 9:39 a.m. *)*

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Welcome to the Veterans Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature as we celebrate Flag Day and please stand for our salute to the flag led by Legislator Barraga.

(Salutation)

I'm going to ask everyone to please remain standing and join us in a moment of silence as we keep all of our brave men and women fighting for our freedoms in our thoughts and prayers.

(Moment of Silence)

Thank you.

Okay. Again, thank you for joining us this morning. We're going to go first to the public portion and the first card that I have here is Dori Scofield. Ms. Scofield, welcome.

MS. SCOFIELD:

Thank you. My name is Dori Scofield and I run an organization called Paws of War here in Suffolk County and I want to just tell you a little bit about us. We are a nonprofit, all volunteer organization dedicated to helping our military veterans, men and women, by providing them with service dogs that are all rescue dogs. As many of you know, I do animal rescue work, and matching them up with our veterans for companion animals, emotional support and trained service dogs.

We are proud to be part of the Suffolk County Veterans Permit, which I worked really hard for and I want to thank everybody who helped us get that because it was a process, and we worked really hard to be part of the disbursement for the marathon funding. And our grant application was a typical long grant application, but I'm proud that we got through it and I want to thank everybody who supports our organization, because helping our veterans is our priority and I want to thank Suffolk County veterans and everybody who was on the committee for the Marathon disbursements. I know there's been some issues that I'm not even aware of but I do want to thank you for helping us to help both ends of the leash. So that's it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you for being with us. Maybe before you leave you can share with us some of the things coming up for the organization.

MS. SCOFIELD:

Oh, we have a lot of things coming up. This year we're going to be at all the veterans events, part of a golf outing. We have our own fundraisers at different locations all summer long. It costs about \$5,000 per dog, so we are constantly fundraising. It just never ends. Lots of good things coming up all summer long. You can check out our website, pawsofwar.org. All of the money goes towards the training, the vetting of the dogs, and the transport of the dogs. It's pretty simple, but the training is a lot of money and that's where most of the money goes. Thank you.

LEG. ANKER:

I have a question.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Hold on, hold on. You were so close. Legislator Anker has a question for you.

LEG. ANKER:

It's not necessarily a question, but I just wanted to thank you for the work that you've been doing, both the Save-A-Pet and then Paws of War. Both my daughters are just enamored with what you're doing. I know Erica had raised money for Save-A-Pet, and now Rachel, my younger daughter, she's saying, "Are you going to call Dori? I want to help her." So you're inspiring so many people.

MS. SCOFIELD:

We're all volunteers and we need more volunteers. We're all about helping our youth, too, so you've got to send her down.

LEG. ANKER:

I will, and I don't know if you're aware, my dad was a navy veteran. He passed last year but, you know, military -- we've always recognized our military heroes, but I think lately we're really becoming aware of their sacrifices.

MS. SCOFIELD:

I absolutely agree. My dad was a World War II hero to me always, and he's my inspiration. So we're so proud to do what we do, and it's an honor. Thank you.

LEG. ANKER:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Hold on, hold on. Legislator Kennedy has a question for you.

LEG. KENNEDY:

Hi, Dori.

MS. SCOFIELD:

Hi.

LEG. KENNEDY:

I just want to tell you that it made a difference in the life of two of my military veterans and it's phenomenal. Thank you.

MS. SCOFIELD:

It really does make -- I'm so proud that we're able to make a difference in their lives. A lot of them are, you know, PTSD is those invisible wounds that people don't want to acknowledge, and traumatic brain injury, so our dogs do a variety of therapy and service to our veterans and we're really proud of both ends of the leash, like I said. Thank you.

LEG. KENNEDY:

Excellent.

MS. SCOFIELD:

That's it? Okay, thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. The next card that I have is John Cuoney. Commander Cuoney, welcome.

MR. CUONEY:

Good morning. Thank you, and thank you for the invite. This is our third request for a special meeting and presentation to determine why and how County funds were given to veterans charity

organizations that were noncompliant with Suffolk County law and ineligible to even apply for the funds as defined by the grant program. Page three of the application instructions state, "Applications must be submitted by a certified 501(C)3" among others, "that is registered and in good standing with the Suffolk County Veterans Services Agency." In other words, the various explanations about pending applications and the like are irrelevant. Pending is just a way to dress up noncompliant with Suffolk County law. Unless the organization had completed the registration and had been issued a permit, they were ineligible to even apply for the funds as defined by the grant program. The deadline was January 29. That's the law and the explicit requirements concerning these funds.

The organizations at issue might be the best organizations in the country, but they were simply not eligible at the time to apply for the funds. Shortcuts and cutting corners with regard to the law and procurement requirements invariably lead to abuse. That's why we have the law and the procurement requirements.

In addition, we've recently learned that registered and compliant organizations with Suffolk County law applied for grant funds and were denied. So not only did we award funds to organizations that were not yet compliant, but other organizations that went through all of the requirements to get certified and registered, and it's a lot of requirements to do so for our community to have the transparency, but they went through that and they were denied funds. Again, applications must be submitted by a certified 501(C)3 that is registered and in good standing with the Suffolk County Veterans Services Agency.

Again, I'm asking for a meeting and presentation so we can discuss this and get to the bottom about why this happened. That's why the law and procurement is there for. This is one of the reasons Nassau County is in trouble right now, is it not? Oversight over contracts and making sure that we follow the law in the procurement process? Let's award it to the organizations that are compliant and make sure we follow the law. That's all. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. The next card I have is Don McKay.

MR. MCKAY:

Good morning. My name is Don McKay. I'm from Dix Hills. I'm President of a not-for-profit called Cow Harbor Warriors, but I'm speaking today as a private citizen, not on behalf of my group. I will mention my organization. I'm a volunteer, I'm President, but I'm not speaking on behalf of our Board of Directors.

First and foremost, I would like to thank Legislator Barraga, Major General, for your service. I cannot thank you enough, especially your work at Camp Lejeune when our soldiers come back from battlefields of Iraq and Afghanistan helping them assimilate, and that's what our organization primarily does, Cow Harbor Warriors. We raise funds, we are in full compliance with the Suffolk County law working with Tom Ronayne and it's my understanding that the -- I have not seen the letter. I understand that the American Legion in Northport sent a letter making several comments about this law, and Mr. Cuoney just spoke about them. If the law needs to be tweaked, tweak it. It's a fairly new law and it's a good one, however, if it needs to be tweaked than possibly tweak it. But I do understand, and again, I have not seen the letter, but I do understand there are some remarks in that letter that are a little overhanded.

I'm here today as a citizen and also to, you know, I stand with Tom Ronayne. He's a good man, he's a veteran, he's worked very closely with our organization helping us in an honorable way. He's an honorable man.

And number two, I understand some comments in that letter referenced the committee that was created to oversee these funds and disburse these funds. At least three of those people on that committee are Gold Star members. Please, they lost their children in war and we're questioning their integrity?

AUDIENCE MEMBER:

The letter did not address any committee members --

MR. McKAY:

That's my understanding. I haven't seen the letter, but that's what I have been told. That's what I've seen. And this gentleman here yelling while I'm speaking has written letters about me personally, about my organization personally, that were misinformation, off-base, inaccurate. So just take this letter for granted. Thank you for your time.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Okay. Let's see. Madam Clerk, I do not have any cards. Do you have any other cards?

MS. ELLIS:

No, I do not.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Is there anybody else with us today who would like to speak before the committee? All right, seeing none, moving to presentations. The presentation today -- did I see him before?

LEG. KENNEDY:

Yes, he's right over there.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director Ronayne.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members. Thank you as always for the invitation to be here this morning. My apologies for running a bit late this morning. We had some IT issues in the office last night that weren't resolved until this morning, so you do have my apologies for holding the committee up if that at all was the case.

My purpose here this morning is to report to you on the state of the not-for-profit permit program in Suffolk County. Copies have been distributed. I understand that they've been distributed fairly last minute so, you know, please indulge me and certainly whatever time is necessary for you to digest the material in the report as I speak or in questions following.

Briefly I would like to read my presentation statement. "Pursuant to Suffolk County Charter, Chapter 353, reports to the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency. This report on the status of the Non-Profit Veteran Certification Program is respectfully submitted to all County Legislators. Thirty organizations have been notified of the Suffolk County Not-For-Profit Certification Program under this law. Application for registration and a copy of the Suffolk County Chapter 353, Article 3, Registration For Not-Profit organizations, is mailed to all not-for-profit organizations as they become known to the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency.

As per legislation, an informational spreadsheet has been listed on the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency website at www.suffolkcountyny.gov/veterans. This spreadsheet provides Suffolk County residents with a review of each organization's funds raised, monies given to assist veterans

and their families, percentage of donations paid to professional fundraisers, and funds expended to support veteran's programs in Suffolk County. Notification of all permit certifications are listed. Percentages shown help our constituents determine if an organization that they want to support is providing those services or programs desired for veterans and their families. This spreadsheet is updated on a monthly basis.

Sixteen organizations have been fully certified through the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency. Each of these organizations receives a certificate with individual number and year, name of organization, issue and expiration date. Four organizations are pending submission or review of documents by Suffolk County."

And I'd like to make clear that pending review does not always necessarily represent that they are pending review within the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency. A part of this process is that the financial submissions are referred to the Office of the County Comptroller and they also conduct a review and due diligence before responding back to our office. So there are multiple tiers of vetting that occur and I just want that to be clear.

"Nine organizations have not responded to our notification of law and several attempts were requesting documentation and compliance. Enforcement proceedings will be brought in the name of Suffolk County by the County Attorney, subjecting each organization in noncompliance with civil penalties as stated in Suffolk County Chapter 353, Section 5. Notification of noncompliance has also been mailed to Wounded Warrior Project with the submission required date of June 17, 2016. The County Attorney's Office will be advised if documentation is not forthcoming by that date.

Suffolk County Attorney is preparing a confidentiality agreement for 911 Veterans to resolve privacy issues of names of veterans receiving assistance through that program".

I'd like to address that point first, and then get into the actual report. Of the organizations and agencies who have submitted applications for permits to the County, all have been -- there's been determinations made on all in one manner or another with the exception of 911 Veterans. And I wanted to be clear that the reason for that is not a deficit on the part of 911 Veterans nor a failure to respond. They have a unique situation with regard to a relationship with the Northport V.A. Medical Center, through which they receive the majority of their referrals. They have a confidentiality agreement with the Northport V.A. attesting that they will protect the privacy, any personally identifying information as it relates to veterans who are referred to that organization by V.A. This organization has complied fully with all of our requests for information except for the list of names and identifying information for the individual veterans receiving assistance.

We in the County are in the process of working with the County Attorney's Office, and I expect in short order that we would have the confidentiality agreement that we have been discussing that we will be providing to the organization who, in turn, will submit it to the Northport V.A. Medical Center for their acceptance. That disclosure -- that agreement will reiterate the County's policy that no personally identifying information submitted through this process will be subject to public review, nor is it FOILable, that we continue as we do with all personally identifying materials to keep that material confidential.

Upon acceptance of this agreement, we expect to complete the process with this organization. It has been made clear to this organization, however, that should the confidentiality agreement that the County provides to them not be to the satisfaction of the Northport V.A. and that they ultimately choose to not submit to us the list of material that we have requested, then they would not be issued a permit. That is the only organization presently that falls into such a status, and I wanted to make that clear given that we outlined it specifically in my report.

As you will see, when you review this spreadsheet, as you examine it, there are a number of organizations who identify or appear as exempt and consistent with the law. These organizations are any of our veterans service organizations, any of our nationally chartered veterans service organizations, who, again, who hold the National Charter. They are not subject to the provisions of this law and therefore are not issued permits through Suffolk County, nor do we request applications or the information typically requested through the application process.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Has that been distributed? Director, what members of the committee have that has been distributed, I just want to make clear what everybody is looking on to make sure that everybody is looking on the same thing.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

There are two sets of legal size documents.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Right.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The one with the shaded boxes is not the -- it is the other one that I'm referring to.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Right, exactly.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

At the top of it it says --

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Yes, which has not been distributed to members of the committee, which is why I wanted to make sure --

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I apologize. I thought --

CHAIRMAN STERN:

-- that everybody is looking on the same thing. One of them is going to have to do with the report that you are giving on those organizations that have been certified, and the one that has been distributed, just to be clear, this is the one with the applications for the grants distributions.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That is for informational purposes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Right, so we're going to get to this one afterwards. So hold on just one moment. Okay, everybody have? All right. Everybody is in receipt of the copy, Director, so go right ahead. Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Again, and I think the document is fairly self-explanatory, but I'm delighted to respond to any questions explaining anything in particular or any specifics in the document. What this is is a breakdown of the applicant, the amount of funds raised by each of the respective applicants, and the amount of money and percentage of those funds that are expended within Suffolk County providing support to veterans within Suffolk County.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. Director, while everybody is taking a look, maybe you can take us through -- I'm just looking at item number one, and maybe if you can just read across the line and it will serve as an example for members of the committee to follow along.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Again, column one would identify the name and address of the applicant or contact information for the applicant. The second column is simply a description of whether or not the application is for an initial permit or a renewal of an existing permit. Documents received would be a breakdown of the specific documents that have been requested by us and submitted to us through that applicant. Most of them simply refer to the County law, the County Code. There are several who include additional information, and those would represent organizations or areas where we required additional supporting or supplemental information. When that information is submitted we would annotate that. We would also indicate in that column when and if an applicant, upon having been contacted by our office, is not responsive and subsequent attempts to make contact with that organization to receive the documentation requested.

The next column would identify the amount of funds or the total amount of funds raised in the previous year, and all of these submissions refer to a prior year. We're always one year behind on this. Obviously the submissions relate to numbers for their prior operating year. We cannot project what their numbers would be for this, so all of this material is one year in the past. Total amount of funds or services given to assist veterans and their families in the previous year in Suffolk County. And that's an important distinction because while many of these organizations do operate exclusively in Suffolk County, there are a number who operate with a regionally or nationally and not all of the funds that they bring in are necessarily expended in Suffolk County. So we try to develop a sense of how much of the funds, what portion of those funds are directly benefitting veterans of Suffolk County. And that, I think, is important to the consumer when they examine this list so that they can make a determination themselves as to whether or not the organization is providing a level of support within our actual community or if their reach is more global.

The percentage -- the amount and percentage of monies paid to professional fundraisers, that was included several years ago in this law. Unfortunately there are a number of organizations who engage in professional fundraising for not-for-profit organizations and historically those professional fundraisers have retained a large portion of the funds raised on behalf. So when you get that telephone call at home during the dinner hour asking you to support organization x, y or z, the dollar that you donate very often largely does not go entirely to the organization. In fact, we know of instances where the professional fundraisers retain as much as 75 or more percent of the funds raised. I think that is a very important piece of information for the consumer to have access to, whether or not they're paying salaries of a fundraiser or the dollars are going directly to the cause that they hope to be donating towards.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director, as I look through the, I'm sorry to interrupt, but as I look through the report here in that column, if I'm reading it correctly, it shows consistently zero percent. So we're going to take that as a positive I would assume, and I do recall one of the underlying purposes of this legislation was to put consumers and supporters of our veterans and their families on notice for exactly the kind of information that you are suggesting at least should be a consideration when deciding whether or not to make a donation to a worthy organization. So I'm looking down the list here and I see zero dollars, zero percent.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

That's accurate?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

To our knowledge, and again, we would see no reason why an applicant would not disclose such an expense, because in my view it would reduce their bottom line number and make it easier for them to explain their remaining dollars. If somebody is using a fundraiser I don't know why they wouldn't disclose it, and we have not encountered an instance to date where somebody is actually engaging those fundraisers. So I see that as a strong positive.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Absolutely. All right. Thank you. Sorry.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The next column would be the amount of and percentage of monies raised that were expended to support veterans programs in Suffolk County in the previous year. And again, that number would not necessarily carry over from the previous number if they were operating solely within the County of Suffolk or in areas beyond the County of Suffolk. Some of the numbers do mirror one another, in other cases they do not.

Then we would look to the amount of monies that remain undistributed for the preceding fiscal year. As we all know, not every business, not every not-for-profit expends the entire amount of monies that they had brought in during the prior year. This would reflect the carryover that the respective agencies or organizations have on their books at the time of the submission to us.

And finally, the last two columns would indicate the certificate number having been issued by the County and the expiration date of those certificates.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

As I look, Director, across the top, other than the certification dates and the number and the date of expiration, all of the information that was derived during the audit and the documentation presented, these are all items that come to you after an investigation done by the County Comptroller.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Correct. We are the initiator of the process. We make the formal requests for the submission of these documents. When the documents are submitted to us, anything related to the finances of the organization are submitted by our office to the Office of the County Comptroller, who then does their own review of that material and they make an assessment as to make a recommendation on the -- on their opinion as to whether or not to approve or take some other action with the applicant. And again, the Office of the Comptroller is just far, far more qualified than we are to make such determinations. The finances, quite honestly, and I've said this in the past, our agency, we are not an auditing entity and we are not a law enforcement entity. So for the Comptroller to have become a part of this process, I think, was again, once again, a very strong positive. I think it complimented the process significantly.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Right now what would you say the average time is for the Comptroller and the Comptroller's Office to do their financial documentation review?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The Comptroller has actually gotten very good with this, in most cases I would say within a week or two.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Very good.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

There are exceptions to that obviously. Typically the exceptions would relate more to the requirement for additional materials to be submitted and then we engage in the process of coming back to us, us submitting out the requests to the applicant for additional information, and it becomes a new submission process. But the Comptroller, once in receipt of all of the materials requested and necessary for their review, have been very good.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Legislator Kennedy has a question.

LEG. KENNEDY:

Good morning, Tom. How are you today?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good morning.

LEG. KENNEDY:

I don't know if you were here when -- and I think his title is Commander Cuoney -- spoke? Were you here for that?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes, I was.

LEG. KENNEDY:

Okay. You and I have spoken about this a couple of times. I -- his beef is that on the first page of the Suffolk County Veterans Marathon Grant it states that applications are due at 4:30 p.m. on January 29th, 2016.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Are we on the Marathon or the not-for-profit portion?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Maybe, Legislator Kennedy, if we could, we're going to go to the Marathon and the distribution of funds in a moment. I did just want to make sure that we took the opportunity to ask the Director any specific questions on the report that he has submitted that we have before us and then we'll get to Marathon.

LEG. KENNEDY:

All right.

LEG. ANKER:

I have a question.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker has a question on the report that's been submitted.

LEG. ANKER:

Hi, Tom. The question I have, again, I'm trying to understand the overall contribution and the information on this chart, and as I'm looking through it, there's a lot of missing information, you know, towards the middle of it where I guess those organizations did not provide the amount and

percentage of monies raised, that were expended to support veterans. There's -- out of the one -- six categories, excluding certificate number and expiration date and then the other information to the left, it's empty. And so basically we can't provide the funding support without this information. Is that correct?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, a number of the organizations included in this spreadsheet have not received permits or are not in good standing, and that would be reflected in the last column. So if they have not responded we would indicate that they had not responded and we would indicate that they -- in this instance, "non-compliance with Suffolk County law, referred to Suffolk County Attorney." And to be clear, there are several organizations who are still reflected in this report who, to our knowledge, are either no longer actively raising funds.

In one instance there was an organization who was, for lack of a better term, they were a one-shot. They spun up an organization to raise money during a specific period of time. They completed what I believe to have been their mission and they are no longer conducting that activity in the community. However, just in the interest of transparency and clarity, I would much rather leave an agency or an organization who has been on the list, on the list, than to raise any questions as to why somebody might be removed from the list. If you're here, unless somebody gives me a clear path as to why I should or could remove somebody, I just feel more comfortable with leaving all of those past applicants on the document. Just because they're on there does not necessarily mean that they are not --

LEG. ANKER:

A valid organization.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

They may not be viable. They may be on the list but not viable, and that should be reflected --

LEG. ANKER:

And it is. I just wanted to, you know, confirm that, it says information requested. And you give a pretty good detailed description of when you contact that person, what they needed. So the point I'm trying to make is that you have been doing your due diligence to make sure that these organizations qualify and we can't give out taxpayer money, you know, the money that we've raised from the Marathon, to just anybody or any organization. So, you know, I commend you for thoroughly vetting, literally vetting these veteran organizations.

The other question I have for you is I know with certain funding the County requires that a certain amount go towards -- certain funding within an organization go towards the main purpose of helping whatever it may be, and there's -- I think it was a 20% for administration. So do we have that?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Please, I just want to be clear that -- I just want to be clear so that I'm responding appropriately. Is this specific to the Marathon or specific --

LEG. ANKER:

Specific to this Marathon.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Hold on, because we'll get to the Marathon issues in just a moment. But let's just recall this report that's being submitted today is a report as to the certification of agencies that purport to assist veterans and their families in Suffolk County, and this was -- the requirement for certification was originally proposed and passed by this Legislature as a consumer protection effort, because too

many of our neighbors contribute to organizations that unscrupulously prey on our desire to help veterans and their families in need. And too often they and we all would discover that those organizations were let's say not worthy organizations of our contributions. So this is an important effort to raise awareness and it's an important effort on the part of Suffolk County Government to make sure that Suffolk County consumers have the information they need to make an informed decision as to whether or not to make private contributions to these agencies.

Some of these agencies receive dollars from -- we're going to get into those issues in just a moment, but for purposes of the report today, that's the underlying purpose here, is to make sure that Suffolk County taxpayers and our residents have the information they need to make an informed decision. That's what this was about, and so the information that appears as a part of this report after an audit having been conducted by the Comptroller, gives us and gives our neighbors the information that they need to make an informed decision.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I would agree. And I would make two points to your statement. One, this process works and without naming any individual organizations I will tell you that over the several years that this program has been in place we have on occasion encountered organizations that we had questions or concerns regarding, and this process allowed us to identify what may have been previously unknown issues that we were able to engage in dialogue with several organizations. And through negotiation and discussion and understanding, some of these organizations have made very -- honestly very structural changes within their own organizations and they now represent, you know, top players in the community. They're out there doing wonderful work and they've adapted their operations to conform to the Suffolk County law. So I think that while I'm not suggesting that there was any wrongdoing on the part of any of those entities, this process has shown itself to work and we have also identified players who, again, I think because of the scrutiny that this process brought upon them at least, well, two, in fact, I can say with certainty no longer operate in Suffolk County because of this law.

In fact, Debbie Harris from your office and I several years ago engaged one of these individuals in the community. They had a group of people raising funds and they were historically noncompliant to our requests. They were known in the community as bad actors, and when we were able to escalate the amount of scrutiny placed upon them, and the weight of the necessary submissions and compliance -- because there is weight to this. This is not necessarily an easy process for some of these applicants to undergo. Some of these bad actors have simply decided that it's not worth the aggravation to engage in the deception that they were engaging in in Suffolk County and they've moved on. And I think that, again, is a triumph to this program. I think that's precisely what it was intended to accomplish and it has accomplished that.

So -- and I will also say that in the beginning this process was vetted and all the determinations were made entirely by my office, and the inclusion of the Comptroller has been a very welcome addition. It's been a very positive supplement to the process, and I think has gone a long way to helping the process work even better. They're certainly much more qualified than we to engage in financial review. So this has worked.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Accomplishing the dual goal at the time the legislative initiative was introduced and passed of providing greater transparency and greater accountability on the part of these organizations and, again, allowing Suffolk County residents to make an informed decision as to how to allocate, how to utilize their dollars.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes, sir.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Legislator Barraga.

LEG. BARRAGA:
Good morning, Tom.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Good morning.

LEG. BARRAGA:
I have some concerns. Certainly I understand the role of the Comptroller in doing a financial analysis of these particular organizations. That's a real plus and an asset, but the Comptroller is dealing basically with the numbers given to him by the organization. My concern is that after the analysis is done, I take it he makes some sort of a recommendation to someone to issue a permit or not issue a permit. Over and above that, though, my concern has to do with organizations that -- whose reputations have really been dramatically negatively impacted the last six months or 12 months or 18 months, specifically your item 25, which deals with the Wounded Warrior Project. That organization on a national basis has gotten tremendous negative publicity. The upper echelon of that organization has taken a lot of money that should have gone to veterans, and they're partying. One big party after the other. And I think the indication was well, we've kind of changed the top person in the organization. When you take a look at the films, though, it's not just the top person attending. These parties, these events, had often 500 or a thousand people, all part of Wounded Warrior.

So I'm hoping that even though you might get a recommendation from the Comptroller that Suffolk County takes a look at the organization from a national perspective in terms of what is happening, because obviously as we speak there's been a tremendous amount of money, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, because it's the national organization that have been wasted on good times for the upper echelon, but not for the veteran.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Well, I can tell you that a part of the review, and we do this as well as the Comptroller, is we examine not only the submissions that are provided, but we also go and we conduct verification through the Office of the New York State Office of the Attorney General, though their Charities Bureau, to ensure the documents submitted, in fact, mirror what we've received, that their submissions to the State and to the Charities Bureau were, in fact, also made timely.

LEG. BARRAGA:
What I'm getting at, though, is that if you're picking up newspapers and magazines and you're seeing all this adverse publicity and you're seeing different organizations that are not-for-profits who have raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to transfer those monies to Wounded Warrior, only to find out that Wounded Warrior at the upper levels, the management levels, are just having a good time with the money, big chunks of, all right? Then I would think that you'd say to yourself, "Well, you know, we've got to really take a look at the local organization here before we issue any sort of permit based on this adverse publicity." This is not in the best interest of the veterans of Suffolk County.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Well, right now, as you can see by my report, we are still in a status of waiting for them to submit requested information. They have not --

LEG. BARRAGA:
I read it.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

-- complied.

LEG. BARRAGA:

And I agree. All I'm saying is that after they submit the information, you've got to step back and take a look at the big picture and what's going on in that organization regionally and nationally. And if you do that, right now I don't have a very good comfort level of giving them ten cents. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker on this report.

LEG. ANKER:

On this report. Just to follow-up and, again, this basically, you know, again there's the two documents. One specifically has to do with the registration, the veterans not-for-profits and again, the other one, I guess, is the Marathon. But getting back to what we're talking about currently. So there was a local law created, 2011, Local Law No. 5, and that was to require not-for-profit veterans organizations to register. It was -- and that was created in actually 2010. It was amended in 2011, 2012 and 2015. And basically, as Legislator Barraga had just said that, you know, we created this because we're protecting our constituents from fraud, and fraud is rampant, especially now. And it's the lowest of lowest to target our veterans. It's horrific, it really is. And that's why this law was created.

So right now, you know, what we're doing, we're refining it, and we have been refining it throughout the years since it's been created. And I do appreciate that and I think we have to continue to do this and really focus on which organizations truly provide service and which organizations are frauds. And there is some gray area in between, and I think the way you've summarized the report, you know, we're understanding each organization better and better, and I think that's what's most important about what we're doing.

A question for you regarding there's a -- just for example. There's a new organization. They're raising money for veterans. They want to, you know, of course register and they want to apply for funding. Do you sit down individually with those organizations to go through the requirements and the paperwork?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Not always. We sometimes do, but not always, no.

LEG. ANKER:

Can you provide that service?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

We certainly could, yes.

LEG. ANKER:

Yeah, I have an organization, newly formed, and they have the excitement and the energy and they want to do more for our veteran community and I'll be sending them your way.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Any other questions for the Director on this report that is before us? The Director has

submitted this report. I'm going to ask a question of Counsel. This is an annual requirement on the part of the Director of our Veterans Services Agency, to submit an annual report to this committee for our consideration. That is an annual report that needs to be submitted when?

MS. SIMPSON:

It must be submitted by June 15th of each year.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. And so in your opinion the report being submitted today that is placed before us is timely as provided under the law?

MS. SIMPSON:

That is correct.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Director, why don't you take us through, then, the next document that you've submitted and then we'll have questions on that.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The next document is the summary of the marathon, Suffolk County Marathon Grant applications. And again, similarly, it is a breakdown of the organization, the points of contact and the specific contact entity within the organization, verification of their IRS not-for-profit status or an acknowledgement of their exemption as a Congressionally chartered veterans service organization.

Their scope, whether they encompass work on a local level, whether it's within a township or the County or if it's a more broad geographic area that they serve, the amount of funding requested, the leveraging amount, and I think this is to Legislator Anker's question a moment ago, is the levering amount which was the portion that, you know, we call it skin in the game. We felt that there was a value in having an expectation that applicants not receive in its entirety the funds necessary to conduct the program that they were pursuing or continuing with these funds but that, in fact, they have skin in the game that they apply leveraging funds from within their own resources that we believe would enhance their commitment to ensure that the program was effectively managed.

Further to the right on that same document you will see the Suffolk County certification number and that refers to the report that we just went through, which was the Suffolk County Not-for-profit Registration Program. That would indicate whether they have a permit, whether the permit is current or in renewal, or if they are exempted from having a permit at all.

And then finally the columns that are shaded indicate organizations who applied for and were -- successfully navigated the process and were granted funds. I want to be very clear that while the funds have been identified for disbursement, no funds to date have been released. No entity under this program has received any County funding whatsoever under this program. We are still in the process of finalizing contracts for each of the organizations with the County Attorney's Office, and until such time as all of the contracts have been properly executed and we do one final assessment, no funds will be released.

So the due diligence here, I think, has been, you know, considerable. I just wanted to make that point. So when you see the values in the shaded columns, please understand that those monies represent dollars that have been identified for disbursement but they have not -- at this time they have not yet been released.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director, before we get into some of the specifics of the report that you've submitted maybe, and we have had this conversation here at this committee on numerous occasions, but if you could, if you can take us through the process once again. The committee, the makeup and membership of the committee, those individuals and who and what they represented and the process that you follow to arrive at the determination that you did.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The committee consisted of a group of representatives. The committee was established as a part of this Legislature. The committee had representation including the Office of the County Executive, the Presiding Officer of the Suffolk County Legislature, the Office of the Chairman of the Suffolk County Legislature's Veterans Committee, the Office of the Suffolk County Legislature Majority Leader and Minority Leaders. We also had on the panel State Senator Tom Croci, who is, in addition to being a New York State Senator, also a Commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve. We had Councilman John Cochran from the Town of Islip, who is a retired U.S. Navy Captain. We had included in the panel were also the County Commanders from the Veterans of Foreign Wars and the County Commander from the American Legion from Suffolk County. We included as well, very significantly I believe, three members of our Gold Star community. We had the parents of -- or I should say we had the father of Navy Lieutenant Michael Murphy, Dan Murphy, who I believe appeared at our last presentation on this matter; Tim Scherer, the father of Marine Corporal Christopher Scherer; and Michele McNaughton, the mother of Army Sergeant James McNaughton.

I also served on the committee. I served as Chair. To be clear, and I think this is an important piece of information. When the committee convened, given that we were going to be examining and reviewing information submitted by multiple organizations from throughout Suffolk County, the likelihood given my Chair, given my position as Director, was that I was going to certainly have some knowledge on at least some of these applicants. In the interest of fairness and transparency, I made it clear at the committee that I would recuse myself, and I did so and I subsequently did not vote on any of the applications for funding under this program. I felt that, again, except in the instance where perhaps a tie would need to be broken I felt it was the more responsible thing to do, to extract myself from the voting for that reason, in the interest of transparency and fairness, so that any potential knowledge or bias that I may have in favor of or against any applicant would not be reflected in the deliberations.

The applications for funding under the Marathon Grant Program were received upon receipt and being entered into our office. Once all applications had been received, they were distributed, a full copy of each application was distributed to each panel member, to each committee member, for their analysis. We subsequently met and the discussion at that final meeting included a discussion by each of the panel members as to their review of the individual applications, and they were reviewed individually one by one.

Once the discussion portion was conducted a scoring was held and there were blind scores offered by each of the committee members. There had been a prior understanding reached at the committee that we would establish thresholds for scoring and that for applicants to be considered for funding that they would have to score on average across the entire committee, above a particular threshold.

When the scores were tallied we, again, went through each of the individual applications, assigned the values of the scores. All applications that scored above the threshold that has been established -- and at that point the round one threshold was 70 percentile. All applications that had been scored at 70% or higher were set aside for additional consideration under round one. Any organization that scored below 70% was set aside for consideration under a potential round two if, in fact, there was to be a round two, and that would only have occurred if all of the funds available were not allocated in round one. As it turned out, there were no funds in excess so the round two was never considered. All of the round one applicants who were funded consumed the full amount of funds that we had available to disburse.

There were two applications that were rejected out of hand. One was for incompleteness -- and actually they were both for incompleteness I believe. Those two were set aside. Of the 19 that were, in fact, selected by the committee, then we went back and did the assessment as to what the allocations for each of those individual organizations would be. Each application included a requested amount or an ask. The cumulative total of the requested amounts vastly exceeded the amount of money that we had the ability to fund. Therefore, we created a tier or a staging system where we would consider a percentage of the ask as the allocation for that particular organization, and that's how the disbursement amounts were arrived at.

If your ask exceeded, and please forgive me, at the moment I don't have the breakdown of what the tiers were, but if your request exceeded a certain number, then you were to receive a percentage of that number. If your request was below that number within a particular window, then you would have received a different percentage, and then finally there was the lowest of the three. If your ask was below a final threshold then there would be a different percentage.

There were two organizations who were funded in full. They were the two smallest applications. I believe they were \$3,000 and I can refer to the spreadsheet. All others did incur a reduction in the amount of money that they were allocated under the process. And ultimately the amount of monies allocated totalled exactly the amount of money that we had available to us to disburse.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Of the -- so there were 19 organizations that were approved to receive grants.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And at this time none of the 19 have received any of the funding.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That is correct. No monies have been expended at this time.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. And as I look through this list here, members of the committee have -- this is a list of those organizations that had submitted applications and those organizations that are highlighted are the 19 that did ultimately receive a decision to receive funding.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes, with the exception of, and I believe I laid out earlier, and if I didn't I'll do so again. There was the instance specific in my initial report that goes back to my initial report referring to 911 Veterans.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Right, which is number one on the list. So let's talk about that again.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, as I stated earlier, all of the other organizations are in full compliance. The fact that 911 Veterans permit has not yet been granted is in no part, in my view, due to their lack of responsiveness. This has been an internal discussion that we've been having within Suffolk County. At this time we anticipate that when we present them with the confidentiality agreement that we've been discussing that we'll be able to resolve this pretty expeditiously. If it happens that 911 Veterans or the Department of Veterans Affairs at Northport are not willing to accept the terms of the confidentiality agreement, then this will not be signed off on and 911 will not be able to receive funds.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. I want to go back to 911 in just a moment, but the -- all of the other organizations that are highlighted on this list that you've submitted that are to receive grants from the Marathon Funding --

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

You are telling -- you are saying to this committee that each of these organizations is in good standing as is required under our certification law that we were discussing before or are otherwise exempt from our certification requirement.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That is correct.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. I think it's important to be clear here as to these organizations and the current status. Without going through each of them, they're all -- it's all very clearly marked here on what you've submitted, Director, but there's a difference between those that are certified as we've required it, and those that are not certified because of an exemption. So maybe you can speak to those organizations that are not required under our law to receive certification. Those are what kind of -- what kind of organizations are they, why are they exempt.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, these would be, again, under the law organizations that are Congressionally Chartered, that are -- and these typically represent the organizations like the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, Gold Star Mothers, organizations of that type.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. So are any of these organizations in any kind of violation of our requirements that you're aware of?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Not that I'm aware of, no.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. Other than --

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Save for the 911.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Other than 911, all of these other organizations are either permitted, certified or otherwise exempt from our requirement.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That is correct.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. So cumulatively, then, you would consider them all to be in good standing and eligible to be in receipt of these funds.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That is correct.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. All right. And let me ask you this. 911 has an ongoing substantive issue with you regarding its certification, which you have explained. Was 911 previously certified?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes, they were. They had submitted an application for a renewal of an existing permit.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. So this is not an organization that was unknown to the Suffolk County Veterans Services Agency. There is now this issue that needs to be resolved, but this was an organization that had been certified and was operating and eligible to conduct fundraising activities in Suffolk County?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

In the view of my office and the Office of the County Comptroller, yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Legislator Kennedy.

LEG. KENNEDY:

Okay, Tom, getting back to what I started on before. The gentleman who complained, his issue appears to me to be the application due date and the fact that other people did not -- other organizations did not get their application in -- their completed application in on time. But what I see here is that the majority of organizations between the veterans and the Comptroller's Office were requested additional information. And according to your report, the organizations that you have projected to give money to are Federally chartered, so they have a little bit less requirements.

What I'm going to ask at this point is that this year when we have the run, could we change the front page and take out the word completed application so it doesn't cause distress? Because if the veterans organization and the Comptroller ask for additional information then it's obviously not a completed application. You understand what I'm trying to say?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

So what you'd like to do is see that language changed to state application submitted pending internal review?

LEG. KENNEDY:

Correct, something along those lines. I think that might solve 99% of the issues.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That obviously is not my final decision, but I will certainly raise the discussion and report back to you on the outcome. I don't imagine it's a problem.

LEG. KENNEDY:

Thank you. You've done an excellent job on both reports, and I just want to make a statement on 911 Veterans. They, too, have been a regular in helping our veterans for years. During the two years ago, the really bad winter, our office used them to assist numerous veterans with broken pipe issues, paying for plumbers, oil drops when HEAP was out, was completed. They're an excellent organization and I -- the confidentiality with the Northport V.A, I don't know how the veterans work that, but I would think that it's akin to a HIPAA law?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The nature of -- much of the -- many of the veterans who are served by 911 Veterans apparently are put in contact with 911 through a referral set up that they have with the Office of Social Work at the Northport V.A. V.A. holds 911 Veterans to a confidentiality standard. Out of respect for that agreement, 911 has resisted sharing the personally identifying information relevant to the veterans with us. We're trying to navigate that in such a way that all parties would remain satisfied.

To your point a moment ago about them being an organization who historically has served the community very well and done good work, we happen to think highly of them. We think they do good work. That, however, unfortunately does not exempt them from requirements under the law and, you know, we will act accordingly. I'm hopeful that they will be able to resolve this issue because I do think that they are an important part of the support community in Suffolk County. But, again, they, as with anybody else, are subject to the same requirements and we continue to make every effort but, again, I want to be clear also that the delay in the issuance of their permit is in no way -- not withstanding their refusal to submit their list. The concern, the issue is one of Suffolk County, so I would place the responsibility for that delay on us and that they have been good actors and they have been very cooperative throughout in trying to resolve this issue. But your point is well taken. I thank you.

LEG. KENNEDY:

Okay. Thank you for your service continually.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And just to wrap up on that one issue. The bottom line here is if they are able to resolve the outstanding issue, then they will be eligible to receive the grant disbursement. If they are not able to resolve it, they will not be eligible. It really is that straightforward.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

If they are unable to come into compliance then they will be deemed ineligible to receive grant funding and they will not receive money.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Anything else for the Director? Everybody's good with the Director? Director, thank you. As always we appreciate you being here and taking the time to share this information, the documentation, with us and we look forward to continuing to play an important role here in making information available to our residents so that they can make an informed decision as to how to utilize their hard earned dollars when it comes to supporting our veterans and their families.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you, and thank you as always for the support of yourself and the committee.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Okay. Going, then, to the tabled resolution before us.

Tabled Resolutions

1007 - Adopting Local Law No. -2016, A Local Law to provide designated parking for veterans at County facilities (Muratore).

LEG. ANKER:

Motion to table.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

Yes, but on the motion, I know that the --

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Hold on one second. So there's a motion to table by Legislator Anker.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

I'll second, that's fine.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Legislator Martinez. Legislator Martinez.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

I'm not sure if there's anyone here that can answer a couple of questions that some of my colleagues had or have. I guess that's a no?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Maybe is there someone from the Administration who can speak to the resolution?

MR. MARAFINO:

John Marafino, County Executive's Office. The only thing that I'm aware of is that the departments are fine with this moving forward, the departments involved that are in services, DPW and Parks. I can take any of your questions back.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

Okay. Well, John and Counsel, so the questions that were presented, there's just a couple. One, for example, is how would you deal with areas where parking is up to capacity? For example, there's a location and everything is already set to, you know, standards. How will you then satisfy this resolution's request?

MR. MARAFINO:

I mean, I can talk to our Commissioner and find out and let you know.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

The other question regarding dirt parking lots. Are they going to then be paved if they are dirt and/or gravel?

MS. SIMPSON:

Legislator, if I may. This does only apply to parking lots with 30 or more spots. I don't know if we have any that are gravel that are of that size.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

I'm just conveying the questions that my colleagues have.

MS. SIMPSON:

I understand. I'm trying to answer them as best we can.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

Thank you. But, John, if you could just look into that as well.

MR. MARAFINO:

Definitely.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

And then I believe the third one is how will this be enforced. Who will be monitoring those that are parking there and who is not.

MS. SIMPSON:

Monitoring is to be enforced by the Police Department, the Sheriff and the Park Rangers.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

And then let's say, for example -- are there fines connected to this?

MS. SIMPSON:

Yes. There is a fine of \$100.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

All right. Thank you. So I guess those two prior questions some of my colleagues had that they requested I ask.

MR. MARAFINO:

Okay. Great.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

Thank you.

MS. SIMPSON:

I would also like to add with respect to the spaces, this doesn't call for adding any additional parking spots. It would just be the reallocation. So long as the departments get back to you on that. This wouldn't add parking to them.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

Okay.

LEG. ANKER:

I think what, again, what we are concerned about is that there are some very limited parking spaces at some County facilities and buildings, specifically in Riverhead, and I think, again, looking at some of those areas maybe we can just, you know, again, make sure there's enough parking that this requirement will be successful.

MR. MARAFINO:

Yeah, definitely. We'll look into it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Browning.

LEG. BROWNING:

I know I'm not on the committee, however, you know, we have clean pass parking spots. So if it's really that complicated and we have to make a choice between parking for the veterans and clean pass parking, take away the clean pass parking spots if we need to accommodate.

LEG. MARTINEZ:

I agree.

LEG. BARRAGA:

I like that idea.

LEG. ANKER:

I'll withdraw my tabling motion, but I'm just curious, though, again, opening this up. Okay, so the issue is with in certain areas there's just limited amount of parking at County facilities with 30 or more parking spaces available and, you know, I think maybe we should combine the clean pass with the veterans. Of course handicapped is completely different, handicapped should be available all the time. But, you know, again, maybe that's something we can look at in the future. We also have to remember, too, though, a lot of our veterans -- some of our veterans are handicapped, so we do need to make access available and, you know, I think this is an important piece of legislation, so I'll support this.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. So there are now no motions before us. I'll make a motion to approve. Second by Legislator Barraga. Before you go, John, Administration is good? It's doable? It's achievable?

MR. MARAFINO:

Yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Very good. There is a motion and a second. I'll call the vote. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? IR 1007 is approved. There being no other business before the committee, we are adjourned.

(*The meeting was adjourned at 10:54 a.m.*)