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4 **VETERANS COMMITTEE**
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6 **OF THE**
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8 **SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE**
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10 **MINUTES**
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15 A meeting of the Veterans Committee of the Suffolk County
16 Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative
17 Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, 725
18 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on March 21, 2017.
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21

22 **MEMBERS PRESENT:**

23 Leg. Steve Stern, Chairperson
24 Leg. Sarah S. Anker, Vice Chair
25 Leg. Leg. Thomas F. Barraga
26 Leg. Lou D'Amaro (excused absence)
27 Leg. Leslie Kennedy
28 Leg. Monica Martinez
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30
31

32 **ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:**

33 Amy Ellis, Chief Deputy Clerk/Legislature
34 Andrew Tarantowicz, Budget Review Office
35 Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
36 Justin Littell, Aide to Leg. D'Amaro
37 Robyn Fellrath, Aide to Leg. Anker
38 Ali Nazir, Aide to Leg. Kennedy
39 Seth Squicciarino, Aide to Leg. Hahn
40 John Marafino, County Executive's Office
41 Rick Brand, Newsday
42 Thomas Ronayne, Director/Veterans Service Agency
43 Marcella Leis, Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program
44 Michael Azzato, Eye Photography/WW II Veterans
45 And all other interested parties
46
47

48 **MINUTES TAKEN BY:**

49 Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer
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THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 9:42 AM

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Good morning and welcome everyone to the Veterans Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature. I ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Barraga.

SALUTATION

I ask everybody to please remain standing, join us in a moment of silence as we keep all of our brave men and women fighting for our freedoms overseas around the world in our thoughts and prayers.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

Thank you.

Again, good morning, and welcome everyone. Thanks so much for joining us today.

We do not have legislation requiring votes before us today, but we do have some special guests that are joining us this morning. Before we go to the Director, we invite up Michael Azzato. Michael's going to share with us some information about a program and a service that he's providing to our veterans in all of our communities.

Michael, welcome. Before you begin, let me just note for the record that Legislator D'Amaro is not joining us this morning; he has an excused absence.

MR. AZZATO:

Good morning. I was invited to speak here today by Steve. I met him at a networking event and I mentioned a program or project that I've been wanting to do and actually started to do it and that is to photograph World War II vets. It's a project I wanted to do for many, many years. And, as I say, the devil is in the details. And I would just get bogged down in it and just never actually come to do it.

Then serendipitously, I guess, there was an article in the Southampton Press. And it was a program that the Westhampton Library is doing. I guess they're doing it for a year and that is celebrating and honoring not only World War II vets but local town heroes. And the person that they were honoring in January happened to be my wife's history teacher at Westhampton High.

And so it seemed like a great time to call them. They invited me down. I met with the Commander of the VFW Hall, I met with the Director. And I ended up taking a picture for them of -- he's a Korean war vet. And so I took his portrait. And then what they do, the library that is, they print it up, put it in a frame. And I think it's the third Thursday of the month the Westhampton VFW Hall has a ceremony. And the library presents the person with this photograph that I've taken, commemorative flag. And they have a ceremony, which I also, you know, photograph.

1 Then I did another one last month; was World War II veteran, okay.
2 And it's just a project that I've been wanting to do. And as I
3 said, the problem is right now I go either to the VFW Hall and take
4 their photo there or I go to the person's home. So it's nice.
5 It's one at a time, but there's so many.

6
7 And, you know, as I started to do research, a World War II vet dies
8 every three minutes. So a person I've known for many, many years
9 just passed away about a a month ago. He was a photographer in
09:46AM 10 World War II. He used to hang out of the planes while they were
11 being shot at and take photos. And these are very humble people;
12 lot of them don't even want to talk about the experiences.

13
14 And I think it's something that future generations, especially
15 younger people today, need to understand and really have their feet
16 on the ground. They're so involved with, you know, videos and, you
17 know, movies and things of that sort that they don't realize that
18 we're all here right now because of our World War II veterans;
19 because that was a very, very tricky war. And as I had mentioned
09:46AM 20 to Steve, a lot of the rockets that Hitler built blew up on the
21 launching pads because Hitler wouldn't give them the time, the
22 scientists, that is, to perfect it. He just wanted to go, go, go.
23 Luckily they all blew up and luckily we're here, we prevail.

24
25 So it's a project that I want to do. It would be nice if I could
26 photograph many people at one time. It would just save me a lot of
27 running around, setting up, driving and that type of thing. If
28 someone could coordinate and give me a list of people or say, *okay,*
29 *you come here on Thursday, you know, the 30th or whatever, and*
09:47AM 30 *photograph these ten people* -- what the library does in
31 Westhampton, they also do a bio of the person, as I said, they do a
32 big presentation at the VFW Hall when they honor, you know, a
33 particular vet.

34
35 So that's what I'm looking to do. Any assistance with that would
36 be great. This is a pro bono thing. This is something I try to
37 fit in with my other two careers and family life. And it's kind of
38 hectic at times to get everything done, but I just feel very
39 strongly about it. I wanted to do it. And, as I said, if it
09:48AM 40 wasn't for that article, I probably wouldn't be doing it because I
41 didn't know how to get started. Sometimes you meet a World War II
42 vet, they're very humble. Some of them don't even want their
43 pictures taken. They don't think they did anything special, you
44 know, it was just a job that they had to do, they did it and came
45 home and that was it.

46
47 So any help along those lines, you know, getting people together, a
48 place to photograph them would be -- would be nice. As I said, I
49 just do the photo, you know, I touch it up and so forth, give it to
09:48AM 50 whoever, they can print it. Originally I wanted to do the whole
51 thing myself and I realized it was cost prohibitive for me to do
52 everything and time-wise. So that's basically what I want to do.

53
54 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**
55 All right. Michael, thank you.

1 **MR. AZZATO:**

2 Thank you.

3

4 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

5 Thank you for being with us today and for sharing information with
6 all of us. Legislator Anker asked a question yesterday about --

7

8 **MR. AZZATO:**

09:49AM

9 (Walking around horseshoe showing a photo - off mike) I just
10 wanted you to see it just so you get a general idea of what the
11 ceremony was like and what the photo was like.

12

13 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

14 Legislator Anker yesterday asked a question what the future of our
15 libraries look like and what special places they are within all of
16 our communities and the kinds of things, the kinds of services that
17 are offered, the kinds of events that are held honoring our local
18 heroes; you can't get that on the internet. And that's just one of
19 the many things that makes all of our local libraries so important.

20

21 I know in our local library, they have an annual get-together of
22 local veterans where they are honored and given the opportunity to
23 spend time with each other and all of us that owe them a great
24 debt. And so that would be the kind of get-together, the kind of
25 ceremony or event that you're referring to. And I'm sure that if
26 they have it at our local library, they have them in many of our
27 local libraries throughout all of our communities.

28

09:50AM

29 So thank you for wanting to serve those who have served and
30 continue to serve all of us. And we'll make sure to get this
31 information out to all my colleagues so that if they are aware of
32 events in their communities where you can be of service to our
33 local veterans, I'm sure they would want to get that information
34 out to you. Legislator Barraga.

35

36 **MR. AZZATO:**

37 I have spoken at a few.

38

39 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

09:50AM

40 Thank you for what you're doing. In fact, it must be very
41 challenging because the youngest veteran from World War II has to
42 be in his or her 91st year; 93. So, you know, if someone was 18
43 years of age in '45 when they joined, now they'd be in their 91st
44 year. So there are far and few in between. Have you tried, in
45 terms of getting a group of World War II or Korean veterans
46 together, have you tried any of the state veterans homes?

47

48 **MR. AZZATO:**

49 No, I haven't to be honest because --

50

51 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

52 Because, you know, I would think that there will be many veterans
53 -- well, not too many from World War II but certainly some; and
54 then quite a few from Korea who might be living in those homes,
55 where you can get together as a group and take a group photo.
56 Because when you go American Legion post by post, it's very

1 difficult to find World War II veterans anymore. And a lot of the
2 Korean veterans, you know, they have their challenges as well. I
3 mean, the youngest one would be 81. So and it's -- just to make it
4 a little bit easier, but the one area where you might find a group
5 is the veterans home.

6
7 **MR. AZZATO:**

8 Right. As I said, the problem is I have a really hectic schedule.
9 I can make time if I know where to be to take the photo, you know,
09:51AM 10 and process it and send it to whoever is going to use it.

11
12 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

13 Because most of these veterans' homes, they're very cooperative
14 because -- especially if you're going to take a group photo and
15 their residence is going to be in the local newspapers with the
16 elected official, you know, they're usually -- you know, they're
17 very cooperative gathering together and taking a group photo.

18
19 **MR. AZZATO:**

09:52AM 20 Okay. Any information you can send me, that'll be great.

21
22 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

23 Sure.

24
25 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

26 Legislator Barraga, of course, is right on; and not only those
27 communities that are specifically dedicated to our veterans, but we
28 have such a large veterans population, that you can literally go to
29 any, say, adult community or assisted living community and also
09:52AM 30 find a large number of veterans living under just about any roof
31 where there'll be several there at a time. And I agree with
32 Legislator Barraga, you could speak with administrative director of
33 any of these communities and they would be more than happy to
34 assist in offering that service to veterans that live there and
35 bringing them together and making it a convenient and very
36 meaningful way to meet with them. Legislator Kennedy.

37
38 **LEG. KENNEDY:**

09:53AM 39 Thank you for coming out today and thank you for what you do. It's
40 vital. I have a tremendously large veterans population. So in my
41 head right now I'm thinking of all my AMVETS folks and all my VFWs
42 and all my adults homes and nursing homes. And I can already come
43 up with nine veterans that you can get World War II pictures of
44 that are still with us. I need contact information. So if you can
45 get us a phone number or an e-mail or something --

46
47 **MR. AZZATO:**

48 Yes, I think I gave it to Deborah.

49
50 **MS. HARRIS:**

51 Yes, I have that.

52
53 **LEG. KENNEDY:**

54 Oh, okay. Great. Thank you. Thank you.

1 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

2 One more, one more.

3
4 **LEG. ANKER:**

5 I just want to mention, too, I have a veterans appreciation
6 breakfast coming up. So I'd be happy to have you, you know, attend
7 that. We have a very large VFW post in Rocky Point. We've got a
8 number of veteran groups in the Leisure communities; Leisure Glen,
9 Leisure Knoll, Leisure Village. So there's good potential, you
09:54AM 10 know. And I think it's wonderful. I'm a huge photographer, you
11 know, and I appreciate your time and effort in, again, honoring
12 those. My dad was in the Navy. He passed away recently. And he
13 was just so proud to be part of the military. So, again, I thank
14 you for what you're doing.

15
16 **MR. AZZATO:**

17 Thank you. In fact, if I can mention one thing, Steven had just
18 mentioned about going to these retirement communities and so forth.
19 And the World War II vet that I photographed, who's 93, he lives in
09:54AM 20 one of those communities. So after we finished, he says, *come on,*
21 *we'll go to lunch.* They serve lunch in the place. And he said,
22 *oh, wait,* he says, *I have to change my uniform.* I said *why?* He
23 said *because there are some people* -- this just flabbergasted me --
24 some people in their units that have a thing about World War II war
25 or war vets. So he had to go and change his clothes so he could
26 just go to lunch. So I thought that was kind of sad, you know,
27 because the people living in these communities are older people,
28 they're not young people. So I thought that was kind of a sad
29 situation. Thank you very much. I appreciate it.

09:55AM 30
31 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

32 Thank you. Thanks for being with us today.

33
34 Okay. Director? And let's have Marcelle come up as well.

35
36 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

37 Good morning. As always, Mr. Chairman, members, thank you for the
38 invitation to be here. I've actually got very little to report on
39 this morning. I know that there was a somewhat last minute
09:56AM 40 addition -- pardon me -- to the agenda. And out of consideration
41 for your time, I thought that I would at least initially defer to
42 Marcelle Leis, who is the Project Director for the Joseph Dwyer
43 Veterans Peer Support Project.

44
45 Marcelle has been with us for more than four years. She has been
46 remarkably effective at staying largely behind the scenes. And I
47 think that that has been very unfortunate. She's really the pulse
48 of the Joseph Dwyer Program. And I say not only here in Suffolk
49 County, but she has developed a very broad following statewide.
09:56AM 50 She's garnered a great deal of respect from our colleagues both in
51 our military and veteran community as well as in government. And
52 I'm delighted to be able to introduce to you Marcelle Leis, who is
53 also a 24-year retiree of the Air Force National Guard where she
54 retired as the Chief Master Sergeant of the 106, the Rescue Wing,
55 right here in Westhampton.

1 So Marcelle has brought with her today the annual report for the
2 Joseph Dwyer Program. And I think that there is some information
3 that she'll be able to share that would be both informative and
4 welcomed. So with that I would like to introduce Marcelle.

5
6 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

7 Okay.

8
9 **MS. LEIS:**

09:57AM 10 Good morning everyone. I appreciate your time. Thank you very
11 much for having us here today. I will leave -- when we leave
12 today, I'll leave a copy of reports for everybody to take a look
13 at. It's quite lengthy and obviously we don't have time for that
14 so I'm just going to do a little bit of an overview.

15
16 First of all, Tom, thank you so much for that very humbling
17 introduction. I tell people that I joined when I was 12-years-old
18 so, you know, 24 years of service went very quickly.

19
09:58AM 20 Thank you, Legislator Stern, and all of the rest of the
21 representatives here for your time and for your service to our
22 country and our community. I appreciate and respect all of you
23 that have served and for everybody else that has a family member,
24 which is probably everybody in this room that knows somebody that
25 served, I thank you for your service as a family member.

26
27 So the Dwyer project is now in its fifth year of work here in
28 Suffolk County. We know that Suffolk County was the first of the
29 original four counties in New York State that received funding for
09:58AM 30 the Dwyer Project. It was a great opportunity and a challenge at
31 the same time, because as you're all aware, Suffolk County is the
32 largest veteran population in the state. And between Nassau and
33 Suffolk County together, we are second in our nation.

34
35 So we do have a lot of work to do. And when we were given this
36 opportunity four years ago to build a program, we had to really
37 find our niche in the community and find out what were the needs
38 and fill the gaps of services that are out there because we know we
39 have Northport VA, we know that they have a lot of patients, a lot
09:59AM 40 of clients there that they work with on a regular basis. But we
41 needed to find a more community-based program. And so when the
42 Dwyer Project started, we had this opportunity to build a program
43 to serve the families as well as the veterans.

44
45 So our mission started to be as a peer group. We had -- the
46 original peer facilitators that came on board were trained peers.
47 Everybody that works with the Dwyer Project that works as a peer
48 mentor is a veteran. We have veterans with our community here in
49 Dwyer Project that are from Vietnam age, Peacetime, OIF OEF and
50 Gulf War Desert Storm veterans.

51
52 So it's important that we recognize that because we understand that
53 it's not a one fit for everybody in the community to serve their
54 needs. We do frequently deal with veterans that are in crisis.
55 Although we are not a crisis response, we are one of the first
56 people that get the phone calls. And 90% of the phone calls that

1 we receive are not from the veteran; it's from the family member or
2 a loved one or a neighbor. I bring that up because it's important
3 to recognize that as the 1% of the population that has served our
4 country, I believe it's the responsibility of 100% of the community
5 to come and bear the responsibility of those returning service
6 members.

7
8 So we know that post traumatic stress is, you know, is an illness
9 diagnosable by the DSM. We do not -- we are not clinicians. We
10 are peers. So it's important that we make sure that we stay within
11 our scope of practice. And so when we deal with a veteran that's
12 in crisis or potentially in crisis, we ensure that they are always
13 found -- they always find a safe place. And what we'll do is we'll
14 do a one-on-one with them and then we'll do a hand off to --
15 whether it's a clinician on the outside or to the VA.

16
17 So the veteran peer support groups are something that we do in the
18 community on a weekly basis. And we found a lot of success mostly
19 with Vietnam-age veterans and the older peacetime veterans, they
20 seem to gravitate more to the groups; whereas the younger
21 generation veterans like the more one-on-one. So we make sure that
22 we can service their needs in any way possible.

23
24 It's important, also, to recognize that no matter what the
25 discharge status is, the Dwyer Project accepts you no matter what;
26 regardless of whether or not your D214 is an honorable discharge,
27 we do not discriminate. So that's something that is vitally
28 important in the community to recognize because not all veterans
29 have the same level of benefit to the veterans services. So we
30 will not discriminate against that.

31
32 I just want to say that in the report you'll see that we served
33 roughly over 2000 veterans last year that would be between veterans
34 and family members; and the total -- the total duplicated amount of
35 veterans was over 6,000 veterans and their families. So we well
36 exceeded our goal last year.

37
38 So I'm here today just to say thank you again for what you do in
39 your communities. Just before I heard you discussing the value of
40 having the library systems and the other services that are out
41 there, I just want to let you know that through Suffolk County
42 Cooperative Libraries, we've been able to access different
43 libraries within the community to provide community education and
44 advocacy on a weekly basis. So that's very important that we
45 enlist everybody that is out there and to continue to communicate
46 the needs and the challenges that we have with the veterans, with
47 everybody; with civilians and veterans and family members.

48
49 So I thank you very much for your time. If you have any questions,
50 obviously I'm here for you. And I will leave a copy of the report,
51 excuse me, and my contact information if anybody needs anything so
52 thank you.

53
54 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

55 Thank you. Thank you for being with us. Of course, thank you for
56 your service and your ongoing service to our veterans and their

1 families and our entire community. We really appreciate all that
2 you do for all of us and for being with us today.

3
4 So tell us about the Dwyer Program specifically as it continues to
5 relate to Suffolk County and really in general. And we all
6 remember back particularly those who have been on this Committee
7 for quite sometime the wonderful announcement that we were going to
8 participate, be one of the very first participants in the program
9 and really have the opportunity not just to provide an outstanding
10 service to our veterans and their families, but to also serve as a
11 model for the rest of New York State and even the rest of the
12 country. So in that regard, where do you see the program at this
13 point and the future of the program in terms of being a model for
14 others to follow?

15
16 **MS. LEIS:**

17 That's a -- thank you -- a very good question. So, again, being
18 one of the original four counties, we have become the model, not
19 just in the State of New York but in the country. I am also
20 working with Tom and other veteran advocates, leaders in various
21 veteran service organizations with Congressman Zeldin's Veteran
22 Advisory Panel to work with him on his bill to make Dwyer Project a
23 national model, a program that we will see throughout the country.

24
25 We were just up in Albany two weeks ago speaking with our
26 representatives to talk about the funding for next year with the
27 Dwyer Project. We are now 15 counties in the State of New York
28 and, again, the model being Suffolk County's since we are the
29 original and we have the largest veteran population and we've seen
30 measurable success in our outcomes as far as, you know, saving
31 lives and quality of life for returning veterans and their
32 families.

33
34 So we're looking forward to our continued funding next year with
35 the State. We're very confident that we will be able to continue
36 our services and continue to act as a model for the rest of -- rest
37 of New York State. And I believe we have one or two more counties
38 that are going to be looking at funding for this year. So we may
39 have number 16 and 17 coming on board. And I can share with you
40 that as one of the original counties, we get calls from other
41 counties on a regular basis to ask about what our best practices
42 are, you know, how we've measured our success and what our
43 challenges have been, too. Because, you know, we've -- you know,
44 we've been out there in the community and we measure the things
45 that work and some of the things that don't and we adapt to the
46 needs, again, to the veterans and their families. So we are
47 definitely a lead -- Suffolk County is a lead in our program.

48
49 Also, just to let you know, the SUNY Albany School of Social
50 Welfare had been contracted within the second year of the Dwyer
51 funding to do -- they're working on a report that we have a print
52 of from last year that is measuring the success of the original
53 four counties. And we can share that. I know, Tom, you have a
54 copy of it. We can send it, if you haven't already seen it, and it
55 does speak to the outcomes, especially here in Suffolk County,
56 testimonials from veterans that have been served and saved; that

1 also serves as a model for the next -- the next six counties, I
2 believe, that are now under that same assessment and they're doing
3 focus groups. And they're doing individual interviews with
4 veterans that have been served within the County. So we can also
5 make that available to you.

6
7 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

8 Did I hear correctly that this past year you had served
9 approximately 2,000 --

10:06AM 10

11 **MS. LEIS:**

12 Yes, sir.

13
14 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

15 -- veterans. How does that compare to year one?

16
17 **MS. LEIS:**

18 I want to say in year one we were closer -- our first year, again,
19 the main focus was to build a program as far as the groups and the
20 advocacy and building community partners. I want to say we were
21 probably only about 700 at the time. And we've grown exponentially
22 every year. And it really is a testimonial to the leadership in
23 the community. We get calls -- we actually got a call about a
24 month ago from a clinician outside of Fort Hood that said that they
25 had a service member that was going to be leaving the area and they
26 heard about the Dwyer Project and they wanted to know that when
27 this service member returns to Long Island, how can we connect them
28 with a resource?

10:06AM 20

10:07AM 30

29
30 So our name is out there throughout the country. We get calls on a
31 regular basis just to hear more about what the program is. And one
32 other thing we worked really hard on the last two years is building
33 a relationship with the VA. Because we recognize that VA does have
34 the services that many of our service members need clinically and
35 otherwise. So what we've done is we're actually crafting an MOU
36 with them as we speak to deliver a bridger program with the VA at
37 Northport and our peer program in the community to help when a
38 veteran is released from -- whether it's inpatient, now they're
39 seeking outpatient treatment, we are asking them to connect them
40 with a peer in our program so that we can plug them in with a group
41 or at least offer additional resources on the outside.

10:07AM 40

42
43 And the last thing, and you'll see it also in the report, we also
44 are a regular presence at the Yaphank Jail with the veterans in the
45 pod. At this time we actually have a group twice a month with the
46 veterans there and we've seen the success with them as well. My
47 project coordinator, who is one of the two peers that goes into the
48 pod, he actually gives them the card. And when they are released,
49 they make a phone call to him and then he helps them with
50 resources, whatever the resource might be. So it's been
51 measurably, like I said, successful in the last year.

10:08AM 50

52
53 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

54 Good. And how many peer volunteers you say participate in the
55 program now?

56

1 **MS. LEIS:**

2 We have -- we have a staff of 12 including John and myself as the
3 two full-timers. We have one part-time that is a family member of
4 a veteran. She's our admin assistant. She helps us with the
5 family needs. And then we have 9 peer mentors that are all
6 veterans, as I said earlier, from different branches of service,
7 different eras.

8
9 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

10 Do you find that number sufficient at this point?

11
12 **MS. LEIS:**

13 We'd like to have more always. It's always important. We're
14 actually looking at a volunteer program. Suffolk County is one of
15 the few counties in the entire state that has Dwyer funding that
16 only has paid peer participants. Many of the other counties, and
17 we're looking at their models to see how they measure the success
18 with volunteer force -- so we're looking at a program there. And
19 we're also working on a grant this year through the Long Island
20 Community Foundation to continue working on the template of what
21 the training is because -- just to note that, because you served
22 doesn't mean necessarily that you have all the skills to be a
23 mentor in that respect. So training is really instrumental in
24 preparing them to have the tools so that they can -- if they do
25 have a veteran in crisis, they know what the signs of suicide are,
26 the risks; and they know what the resources are and they can get
27 them to a safe place. Because not only do we want the veteran to
28 be safe, our staff also has to be safe as well.

29
30 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

31 For those veterans that participate in the group setting, you had
32 said that that meets roughly once a week. For those, I think, you
33 had said essentially our younger veterans prefer more of a
34 one-on-one setting to a group. How often would they meet on a
35 one-on-one setting?

36
37 **MS. LEIS:**

38 With our peer mentors, they meet on an as-need basis. When they're
39 first introduced, it's probably at least once or twice a week that
40 they meet, you know, one-on-one. And there's always a check-in.
41 I've been working with a Desert Storm veteran for the four years
42 that we've been in the program. And if it's not a one-on-one --
43 she's actually housebound at this point and we're providing as many
44 services as possible. Texting is a wonderful way to also just keep
45 just in touch with this generation. So we do -- we keep in touch
46 with them, you know, as the need prevails.

47
48 When they get to a point that they're in a safe place and they're,
49 you know, finding employment or whatever the needs are, it'll taper
50 off maybe once every other week and so on and so forth. But the
51 ones that are most critical get a weekly check-in as minimal.

52
53 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

54 I'm sure that you and the Director were watching with great
55 interest, as we all were, on the release of the proposed federal
56 budget where it shows there's actually a proposed increase in

1 funding for veterans services. I'm sure you hope, like we do, that
2 it's not geared specifically and exclusively just to the VA but
3 these other critically important programs in all of our communities
4 as well.

5
6 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

7 As you've heard me say many, many times, so much of what we do is
8 the direct result and is linkable to the actual service that our
9 service members have provided us. We received a zero federal
10:11AM 10 financial support for these programs. We are very, very hopeful,
11 in fact, we are planning a trip to DC specifically for the purpose
12 of advocating on the Dwyer Program in preparation of testimony.
13 We've actually been in discussions with Congressman Zeldin's office
14 over the past week selecting dates to go down and meet with members
15 of both the house and senate both Armed Services and Veterans
16 Affairs Committee for exactly this reason. Because, quite
17 honestly, the federal government should be a partner in this
18 effort. And the need far exceeds the resources unfortunately that
19 any local government, I think, could reasonably be expected to
10:12AM 20 provide.

21
22 We have been extraordinarily fortunate in Suffolk County, not only
23 to have been able to make a connection to our state level
24 Legislature, but also to be in a county that, quite honestly, we
25 get it; you guys get it; our County Executive gets it. And we
26 appreciate the importance of having this program available to our
27 service members and our veterans. And the proof is in the pudding.
28 The results have -- I think the results very clearly speak for
29 themselves.

30
31 And now that the evaluative research study that was conducted by
32 SUNY Albany School of Social Welfare has been published, this
33 program -- certainly Suffolk County's program based upon the
34 publication of that report is now an evidence-based program. And
35 we are no longer referring to anecdotes and there is no
36 supposition. This is -- this is factual evidence-based data that
37 supports our findings that we've been reporting to you on for
38 several years now. So, yes, we're very hopeful that the increases
39 in federal funding for veterans and military both will translate
10:13AM 40 into a greater recognition of the need for programs such as this.

41
42 One of the very, very important components of this, and there is
43 some -- some disagreement out there about this point, but I feel
44 very strongly that the ability for any person who has worn our
45 uniform, I won't use the word "veteran" because there's some people
46 who do not believe that the title of "veteran" applies to people
47 with certain characters of discharge, but many of the character of
48 separation discharges that we see individuals coming home with that
49 are less than honorable or other than honorable can be directly
10:14AM 50 related to their stressors and their performance and behavior that
51 resulted ultimately in their receiving a General under Honorable,
52 General under other than Honorable, any character of discharge
53 outside of a straight Honorable Discharge, these people have very,
54 very few resources. And most instances absent a service-connected
55 disability, they don't even have access to VA. And that's really
56 tragic.

1 We've had some success in prosecuting discharge upgrades for these
2 individuals when we get to learn who they are and we understand
3 what their stories are. There is a nexus between their service and
4 their -- the nature of their separation. That is one of --
5 probably the most important aspects of this program, is that we are
6 resource available to all who have worn the uniform, not a select
7 few. We don't have a means threshold; we don't have a period or
8 era of service requirement.

9
10:15AM 10 So, again, to your point, we are -- we're very hopeful that the
11 federal government will recognize the need for them to accept a
12 degree of responsibility and become partners in these efforts.
13 Certainly the legislation seeking to expand the program nationally
14 would in some measure accomplish that. But, you know, there is
15 competition for this program. I can tell you that New York State,
16 as supportive as New York State has been, the number of counties
17 represented on this program, and this is based on having met just
18 last week with both the Chairman of Homeland Security, Military and
19 Veterans Affairs and with the majority leader staff, the reason
10:15AM 20 that we have the number of counties on this program that we have is
21 not because they are satisfying all of the districts that would
22 like to have the program, there are financial limitations as to how
23 many counties we can add, we are now in roughly one quarter of the
24 counties in the State of New York, but there are other members who
25 have been working very hard to have the program added to their
26 districts, to their counties, but the recourses simply are not
27 available at this time.

28
10:16AM 29 So as with -- everybody in this room certainly understands the
30 economics of working within a difficult and challenging budget.
31 But this is important work and folks like Marcelle and the team who
32 are out there each day working and serving these veterans, the
33 accomplishments are extraordinary. And I would go so far as to say
34 that -- and we've done some -- we've had some discussions on this
35 and we looked at very, very anecdotally a couple of years ago, what
36 is the ROI, what is the return on investment in spending dollars in
37 places likes the Joseph Dwyer Program as opposed to not providing
38 those services and the cost to the community on the back end in
39 terms of social services, law enforcement, courts, so many areas
10:17AM 40 where we may be bearing the costs that we might not otherwise have
41 to. We'll be able to intercept the problem and effectively manage
42 and deal with the problem and get these folks the help that they so
43 richly deserve. You know, this we not -- we're not giving anybody
44 anything in this. Everybody who comes to Dwyer has earned their
45 right to be there. And we are just very fortunate to be in a place
46 where we've been able to through the support of a Legislature and
47 the County Executive and a larger team, a larger community who
48 understands the importance of this need.

49
10:17AM 50 I'll very briefly share with you that last week while we were in
51 Albany, and, General, I think you'll appreciate the significance of
52 this, we were able to meet with the entire -- the statewide mental
53 health suicide prevention, family support and chaplaincy, the
54 entire statewide team from DMNA, Department of Military and Naval
55 Affairs. And that's a heavy lift to get that group assembled in
56 one place at one time for a meeting essentially from an outside

1 agency. We are a civil authority who had requested to meet with
2 DMNA and they were extremely accommodating and we were able to have
3 Marcelle join me in that meeting. And I will tell you that having
4 the opportunity to be in that room and have some of the discussions
5 that we were able to have over the course of several hours was
6 enlightening, I think, to both DMNA and to the Dwyer Program. And
7 I'm hopeful that -- that discussion will be the first of an ongoing
8 dialogue that will result in an expansion of that relationship and
9 partnership going forward. Because we have an acknowledgement on
10 both sides of that table now that the need does exist and that
11 there is a value added by having this program available to members.

12
13 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

14 When -- the other day when the federal budget was released and some
15 of the commentary, particularly from the Director of the -- of O&B
16 made the comment that there were pretty dramatic, many would say,
17 draconian cuts to so many of the very important programs that, you
18 know, our entire nation has, you know, come to appreciate and to
19 rely on, the comment was that, you know, many of these programs
20 could not effectively show that they were making the kind of
21 difference that the administration felt was important. Here we
22 have a program that we recognize five years of success; and not
23 just anecdotally but quantifiable and verifiable evidence that it
24 is a program that not only works here locally but really does need
25 to be emulated across the country.

26
27 And so with the recognition that there is a proposed increase in
28 federal spending towards providing assistance to our veterans and
29 their families, the hope, of course, is that a quantifiable and
30 verifiable program that works, that really does need to serve as a
31 model for the rest of the country gets it due consideration. And
32 hopefully we and other counties across the country have the
33 resources necessary to provide an outstanding service to our
34 veterans and their families; that, yes, really does need to
35 continue to serve as the model for the rest of the nation.

36
37 Okay. At this point the annual budget from Albany is what; and
38 what are you seeking for next year?

39
40 **MS. LEIS:**

41 I believe that the -- each county was -- it was roughly 170 --
42 170,000 per county. We were fortunate last year, while unfortunate
43 for two other counties that weren't, you know, as responsible, we
44 received a bump-up last year and that actually brought another
45 hundred thousand dollars to the program for us; and quite honestly
46 was able to give us two full-timers that we needed in the county.
47 There's no guarantee that we're going to get the bump-up this year.
48 We're very confident that we'll get the 170,000 that we received
49 from the last, you know, four years of the funding; and hopeful for
50 the additional so that we can continue to provide the services that
51 you can clearly see in the report, we were able to achieve the
52 measurement of the results that we had in 2016.

53
54 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

55 Well, please, let us know at what point we as a committee and we as
56 a Legislature can lend our support during the budget process as we

1 communicate with our representatives up in Albany to let them know
2 how much we appreciate their support for you to allow you to
3 continue to do the outstanding work that you do.

4
5 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

6 The supplemental, the \$100,000 is included in the senate's ask. It
7 is being submitted to the governor; so long as the budget is signed
8 as submitted or that this is not amended, it would be there. But,
9 again, until the budget is signed, we don't know with any
10 certainty.

10:22AM

11
12 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

13 Okay.

14
15 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

16 You know, I would tell you that, you know, if imitation is the
17 greatest form of flattery, then Suffolk County is truly humbled.
18 Because this program is being replicated not only throughout the
19 state, but as Marcelle said, we receive calls from many, many
20 places. And this is important. This has really taken on a
21 momentum that, I think, the time is here that we need to take a
22 closer look at this program and make a determination as to how
23 sustainable is a model such as the Dwyer Program here in Suffolk
24 County without the types of support that the federal government,
25 for example, could provide us. If we have been able to accomplish
26 what we've been able to accomplish on this very, very stark, very,
27 very minimal budget given the resources that we only sometimes
28 dream of, I can only imagine what we could accomplish. And that is
29 our hope. That is -- when we advocate, that is what we are in the
30 long term hoping for.

10:23AM

10:23AM

31
32 I also wanted to make clear that the \$170,000 budget line, the line
33 in the state budget for Suffolk County is actually \$200,000. We've
34 made several references to the SUNY Albany School of Social Welfare
35 Evaluative Research Study Program. That program is actually funded
36 through a draw down from each of the counties being evaluated. So,
37 in essence, the counties are funding their own research; though it
38 is an independent autonomous evaluation, we are funding it through
39 each of the counties within the program.

10:24AM

40
41 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

42 And will that continue indefinitely going forward?

43
44 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

45 To my understanding, yes, yes. I was somewhat critical in the
46 beginning. I thought that those dollars would be far better used
47 locally. But now that they have published certainly very favorably
48 for Suffolk County, I think, that the opportunity to make reference
49 to an outside, to an independent study has tremendous value. And
50 while certainly we can use those funds here, we would -- I would
51 not want to see the SUNY Albany portion of this program go away. I
52 think it's too important in regard to maintaining the opportunity
53 or the ability for outsiders to look at this program objectively,
54 so -- but the one -- if you look at the budget, the line is
55 \$200,000.

10:25AM

1 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

2 Yeah.

3
4 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

5 What the County actually received is -- receives is after a draw
6 down that is applied to the SUNY Albany program.

7
8 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

9 Well, I would agree. You can, like you said, only dream of the
10 various ways you can use that additional funding. But to quantify
11 and to verify and to use that report is a way to leverage hopefully
12 what could happen in a far grander and much more significant level
13 at the federal government and use these numbers. And this type of
14 evaluation to be able to make that successful case hopefully going
15 forward is really invaluable.

16
17 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

18 I also think that, you know, if we had our druthers we would have
19 unlimited resources. I think -- in government -- I think this may
20 sound peculiar, but I'm actually quite happy in retrospect that the
21 program started with a minimal budget. It started on a smaller
22 scale. Because it required us -- you know, warts and all, there
23 have been many lessons learned along the way. But we never found
24 ourselves in a position where we could do so much that we didn't
25 necessarily have to be concerned about each dollar. And I think
26 that the -- not only having to be frugal with our resources, but
27 understanding that next year's dollars were inexorably linked to
28 this year's dollar in our performance, has served us very well.
29 And I think that the program has been able to mature using the more
30 limited resources, the limited means that we've had made available
31 to us in a way that have allowed the program to evolve and become a
32 much stronger program that it might otherwise have.

33
34 I think in -- sum total, I think, this all worked for the very
35 best. We've arrived at a very good place. And you've heard me say
36 it time and again, I'm only the pretty face. Today we have two
37 pretty faces. But so much of the credit, the responsibility for
38 the successes, the lives changed and the lives saved, rests
39 squarely on Marcelle's shoulders. What she has done for this
40 program and for the veterans of Suffolk County, it can't be
41 quantified; it truly can't.

42
43 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

44 There's really only one pretty face.

45
46 (LAUGHTER)

47
48 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

49 Can I have a drum roll, please. (Thumping on table)

50
51 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

52 Okay. Anybody else? All right. Well, a model to be celebrated, a
53 model to be emulated. And myself to you especially thank you for
54 your continued service. And, of course, we wish you every
55 continued success. And please always count on all of us to be able
56 to assist you in any way we can.

1 And, Director, always good to see you. Thank you for being with us
2 today.

3
4 Okay, there being no other business before the Committee this
5 morning, we are adjourned.

6
7 **THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 10:28 AM**
8 **{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**
9

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