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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 May 30, 2017.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Leg. Steve Stern, Chairperson
Leg. Sarah S. Anker, Vice Chair
Leg. Leg. Thomas F. Barraga
Leg. Lou D'Amaro (excused absence)
Leg. Leslie Kennedy
Leg. Monica Martinez
Leg. DuWayne Gregory, Presiding Officer

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Amy Ellis, Chief Deputy Clerk/Legislature
Andrew Tarantowicz, Budget Review Office
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
Robyn Fellrath, Aide to Leg. Anker
Ali Nazir, Aide to Leg. Kennedy
Michael Pitcher, Director of Communications/PO
Seth Squicciarino, Aide to Leg. Hahn
John Stype, Aide to Leg. Krupski
John Marafino, County Executive's Office
Shannon Boyle, Director/New Ground
And all other interested parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 9:37 AM

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Good morning everyone and welcome to the Legislator's Veterans Committee. 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 and join us in a moment of silence as we keep in our thoughts and prayers Navy SEAL Remington Peters who was killed over the Hudson River this past weekend and all of our brave men and women fighting for our freedoms around the world.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

Thank you.

Good morning. And thank you for joining us. Let me first note for the record that Legislator D'Amaro will not be with us today. He has an excused absence. And I'll also note that Director Ronayne, who had been scheduled to be with us today, also will not be joining us as he also has an excused absence.

Let me just note for the record that what Director Ronayne would have spent some time on today is an update on some of the things that he has been working on. I had the opportunity to join Director Ronayne along with Marcelle Leis and Michael Stoltz. The two of them together have been such in integral part of the Joseph Dwyer Peer to Peer Program.

The four of us had the opportunity to meet with several members of congress who are members of the Veterans Affairs Committee in Washington DC to talk about all the good work that's going on here in Suffolk County regarding the Dwyer Program and to help in the effort in moving along the Legislative initiative that was actually introduced by Congressman Zeldin, which would seek to establish a grant program that would enable municipalities all across the country to implement a federal version of the Joseph Dwyer Peer to Peer Program.

Important work; and I'm grateful to my colleagues to have had the opportunity to speak with so many members of congress from across the country about the great successes that we've had here in Suffolk County and to help make the case; that, well, once again, we lead here in Suffolk, particularly when it comes to providing services for our veterans and their families, the important work that we do here and how very much we continue to be a model for the rest of our great nation.

So that's the Tom Ronayne presentation in its Cliff Notes form.

And so then moving on in the agenda, it is my pleasure to welcome Shannon Boyle, Director of New Ground who is going to be discussing

1 some of the good work that her organization does. Welcome.

2
3 **MS. BOYLE:**

4 Thank you. Good morning. Thank you all for having me here today.
5 I'm the Executive Director of New Ground. We're a non-profit
6 organization based in Nassau but serving homeless families and
7 veterans in Nassau and Suffolk Counties. We started in 1991. Our
8 mission at the beginning was working primarily with homeless
9 families on Long Island. And within a couple of years we added
09:41AM 10 single male veterans to our work.

11
12 Over the past year in celebrating our 25th anniversary as an
13 organization focused on breaking the cycle of homelessness, we have
14 begun working with more and more homeless veteran families through
15 the Northport VA.

16
17 As I mentioned, our mission is to break the cycle of homelessness.
18 We do this with a focus on education and empowerment for the
19 parents and children that we work with. We help our families
09:42AM 20 identify whatever barriers and boundaries are standing in their way
21 of being successful and then help them overcome those boundaries
22 one by one. Education is a huge barrier to success and being able
23 to afford market housing on Long Island. So we do a great deal of
24 work with our adults and our children to make sure that they do
25 well in school.

26
27 About a year ago we started communicating directly with the
28 HUD-VASH Program with the Northport VA; that is the Veteran
29 Administration Supportive Housing Program. And we were sharing the
09:43AM 30 work that we've done with homeless families to really break the
31 cycle for the past 25 years. The VA was impressed by what they
32 heard and interested in being able to offer some of our services to
33 the homeless veteran families that are in the VASH Program.

34
35 The HUD-VASH Program, as I'm sure many of you know, has been
36 operating for approximately five years now. There are over 400
37 veteran households in that program. They had to come in -- when
38 they came in, they had to be verified homeless. And then through
39 the VASH Program they secured housing in Nassau/Suffolk County with
09:43AM 40 a VASH voucher with operates similar to a Section 8 voucher. New
41 Ground has been brought in to provide our financial literacy
42 services and our education services to try and help the families of
43 veteran households in the VASH Program maintain their housing and
44 even move beyond the VASH certificate, if possible.

45
46 So we began working. We have a social worker one day a week now at
47 the VA Hospital in Northport. And we have a social worker one day
48 a week at Mitchel Field in Nassau County which is primarily veteran
49 housing. And a large part are HUD-VASH families. And those social
09:44AM 50 workers are meeting individually with the veteran and the veteran's
51 spouse or significant other and helping them improve their credit,
52 learn how to budget, manage their finances, pay down their debts,
53 create a savings. We're also working on education goals, helping
54 the veteran or their significant other determine if they'd like to
55 go back to school to pursue a higher education or certification
56 what that might be. Our social workers are trained to help them

1 figure out what their interests are, to do testing to see what
2 their skill sets are and to really be able to help match them up
3 with an education program that they'll be able to complete
4 successfully and that will lead to higher paying income and stable
5 income.

6
7 And we also provide a lot of the wraparound education services to
8 help make sure that that happens. So we do tutoring. Our
9 Education Assistance Program helps purchase any supplies or pay any
09:45AM 10 fees that are not covered by financial aid; or if the veteran is
11 eligible for the chapter 31 benefits as a recent veteran for their
12 education. Anything that isn't covered, New Ground would assist
13 with so that we can make sure that that parent, that adult is able
14 to complete the program successfully.

15
16 We then also provide those education services to the children in
17 the households. So we have a tutoring program for the children and
18 a reading assistance program. We out of our offices operate our
19 reading after-school program two nights a week; and we added a
09:46AM 20 third night in March at Mitchel Field. So now we are specifically
21 serving families in the HUD-VASH veteran families at Mitchel Field
22 and they come to our location on-site at Mitchel Field one day a
23 week and receive reading assistance and tutoring assistance.

24
25 I think sometimes maybe the easiest way to understand what we do is
26 to share a story which helps reinforce all of that. So recently we
27 -- in April celebrated a four-year anniversary of a family in our
28 program. It's a single father with two men -- or two sons, I
29 apologize. And four years ago they were in a homeless shelter. The
09:46AM 30 family applied for our program. We met with them through a
31 screening process, determined that they were interested in our
32 services and willing to really work the program. They were moved
33 into the housing component of the program out of the shelter. The
34 housing component is operated by a different non-profit
35 organization. The family is expected to pay rent but it's
36 significantly reduced from what regular rent would be. So, for
37 example, a two bedroom apartment in Freeport where this family is
38 living, in our program they're paying \$750 a month rent. But
39 that's what dad could afford.

40
41 He was working is as a security guard in two different -- with two
42 different companies. He was earning about \$8 an hour and he was in
43 significant debt. So he came into our program immediately. We
44 assessed his education background. He did not have his high school
45 diploma or GED and he wanted to start by securing his commercial
46 driving license. So we helped him go to a course, got his CDL.
47 That's something that's not covered by tuition assistance by
48 financial aid so we were able to secure the funding for him to get
49 that. And he completed the CDL. Within six weeks he had a job and
09:48AM 50 was earning \$16 an hour able to drive school buses. He has spent
51 the last three-and-a-half years working towards his GED. And in a
52 couple of weeks -- he's in a high school GED program. In a couple
53 of weeks he's obtaining his high school degree. So for four years
54 he's been working with his CDL but now he's finally going to have a
55 high school diploma which is going to immediately increase his
56 earning potential again.

1 He also spent four years with us really paying down his debt,
2 working on his credit score, working on improving his credit. When
3 he came into our program, he had a credit score in the low 400s.
4 Two months ago we pulled his credit score. It's 801. And that's
5 because he paid off his debt; he used his tax refund every year
6 strategically with his New Ground social worker to figure out how
7 to spend it, which bills to pay, how to prioritize the spending.
8 He's created a savings account through that tax refund every year.

09:49AM

9
10 And about three weeks ago he got called up for a housing lottery.
11 He was on the moderate income list for a housing lottery in
12 Freeport where his boys are in school. And because his credit
13 score was good and he had about \$3,000 in savings, he is signing
14 his lease tomorrow to move into his own apartment. And in three
15 weeks he's getting his high school diploma. So he will then be
16 eligible to apply for places like NYCE or the MTA and the starting
17 salaries there are 50 to 65,000 for a driver. So he's going to be
18 able to support his family successfully going forward.

09:50AM

19
20 His two sons lived with him in a homeless shelter for about three
21 years and have been through our program. They've been getting our
22 tutoring assistance all along. One of them is a junior in high
23 school and one's a freshman; they're both doing very well and on
24 track to continue and graduate. The older son started working last
25 summer. And the first thing that his father did was took him to
26 the bank and opened an account and taught him how to save part of
27 his paycheck every week. And now he's paying for his cell phone
28 bill. So the father of this family is teaching his sons good
29 spending habits, good financial habits because he doesn't want to
30 see his children end up in the same place where he was.

09:50AM

31
32 And that's basically what we do. And so we're now working with the
33 veteran families at HUD-VASH and working towards success stories
34 that will be similar. Thank you.

35
36 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

37 Very good. All right. That's a great example. And I'm sure there
38 are many, many, many other successes that you can share with us
39 along the way, but it's great to hear those stories.

40
41 I had a question about the relationship that you have with the VA
42 up in Northport. Maybe you can go into a little bit greater depth,
43 how that relationship works, how you work with the VA to learn how
44 -- and come into contact with those that need services.

09:52AM

45
46 And, then, I guess my second part of that would be how do you find
47 offering services works best in getting the word out to those
48 veterans that might not ever come into contact with the VA? One of
49 the things that this Committee has learned over the years and knows
50 very well is that the VA reaches maybe only about a third of our
51 veterans and that leaves two-thirds of our veterans' community,
52 which is the largest in New York State, without that contact with
53 VA. And so I'd also wonder how you best come into contact with
54 those veterans and their families in need as well.

1 **MS. BOYLE:**

2 Sure. So our work with the VA with our social worker on-site there
3 as well as our social worker at Mitchel Field, the families that
4 are being referred to us are all in the VA's HUD-VASH Program so
5 they're also coming out of homelessness. Their HUD-VASH worker is
6 -- they each have a HUD-VASH worker assigned to help them locate
7 housing and move into the housing and settle into the housing and
8 then hopefully maintain housing. So the HUD-VASH workers refer
9 their clients, their veterans to us when they are struggling; when
10 they recognize that they need some financial literacy assistance or
11 budgeting assistance or they may go over the different resources
12 and programs that we offer and see what may be of interest to this
13 veteran that they're working with.

09:53AM

14
15 So we have the social worker one day a week at the VA and she's
16 able to see about 10 to 12 different veterans a day there. And
17 then we're also scheduling veterans to come to our offices in
18 Hempstead so that we can see as many as possible. As I mentioned,
19 there are over 400 families currently in the HUD-VASH program and
20 there is a wait list for more -- for more placement. So there are
21 some families that are being referred to us or veterans that are
22 being referred to us that are actually on the wait list for
23 HUD-VASH.

09:53AM

24
25 And that's another good opportunity for us to be working with them,
26 especially with financial literacy because once they get the
27 HUD-VASH voucher, which will help them secure an apartment and be
28 able to afford it, they have to find the apartment; they have to
29 find a landlord that's willing to rent to them. And if their
30 credit is really not very good, it's more challenging to find that
31 landlord.

09:54AM

32
33 So we are called in. We have a referral system. The HUD-VASH
34 worker sends the referral in. Our social worker follows up,
35 schedules an intake, does a couple of first interviews with the
36 veteran and family and assesses their needs and what they might be
37 interested in, what services they're interested in; and then we
38 begin seeing them on a weekly basis and working on the steps that
39 they want to take.

40
41 Because right now the HUD-VASH worker is, in essence, the referral
42 source for us. Any families -- any veterans that are not
43 necessarily involved in HUD-VASH don't necessarily know about the
44 availability of our services. However, we have for over 20 years
45 been working with single male veterans that all resided in a single
46 residence in Hempstead. And so we have many contacts with various
47 different homeless shelters throughout Nassau and Suffolk County;
48 Beacon House and a few others so that we work closely with other
49 veterans who maybe are not directly connected with the VA yet or
50 have never been. If they do come to us, if they find us, we try to
51 work with them and make sure that we can connect them to the most
52 resources available.

09:55AM

53
54 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**
55 Legislator Barraga.

1 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

2 In listening to what you're saying, are many of your clients from
3 an educational perspective pursuing a GED in high school or high
4 diploma; is that in the main when they take about educational
5 advancement, is that what they're pursuing?
6

7 **MS. BOYLE:**

8 No. This -- the father that I mentioned is probably in the lower
9 percentages. Most of our parents come in with a high school
09:56AM 10 diploma, even possibly some college course credits. And then we
11 work with them to help get a higher education.
12

13 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

14 Let me follow-up on that, then. Let's say I'm a client, and I come
15 in, I want to pursue higher education, I want to go to college.
16 Tell me how the financial end of this works. Obviously I qualify
17 for some sort of financial assistance but is that a grant or a loan
18 based on my income, number one? And what I don't receive or I
19 can't cover, does your organization pick up the difference?
20

21 **MS. BOYLE:**

22 Yes. With regards to the education piece, when a family -- an
23 adult comes in and is interested in going back to school, we would
24 meet with them and determine where's the -- what's the right
25 program for them to go to. We would help them apply to the college
26 of their choice. We do talk about numbers and finances and costs
27 and so we often help families determine what's the best financial
28 choice for them self as well. We'll help them complete their
29 financial aid paper work, the FAFSA paper work, to obtain any sort
09:57AM 30 of grants or loans. And then help assess based on their financial
31 aid package what might be the best school of choice and might be
32 the most affordable option.
33

34 So a lot of our families would choose SUNY Farmingdale, Suffolk
35 County Community College or Nassau Community College because a lot
36 of times their income level is so low that they qualify primarily
37 for grants. And so with attending a local community college or a
38 SUNY, a local SUNY, they don't end up having to take loans. It
39 depends, again.
40

41 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

42 That's what I was thinking about.
43

44 **MS. BOYLE:**

45 Yeah.
46

47 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

48 You know, a loan still has to be paid back. And, you know, their
49 situation financially is rather dire to begin with.
50

51 **MS. BOYLE:**

52 Right.
53

54 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

55 And if they qualify for grants, that's a whole different story. Do
56 you have any special relationships with, say, SUNY Farmingdale or

1 Suffolk County Community College; do those colleges, are they aware
2 of your organization and what you do and your goals?

3
4 **MS. BOYLE:**

5 We've worked with a lot of the counselors, the bursar's office,
6 academic counselors. There's actually a veteran's coordinator at
7 SUNY Farmingdale and also at Nassau Community College. So we've
8 worked closely with those individuals. We've also had meetings
9 with Molloy College and some of the other private institutions, St.
10 John's University, who are interested in doing some type of
11 assistance for veterans that are trying to come back and go back to
12 school and maybe it's not completely covered.

13
14 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

15 Suffolk County has an open enrollment policy. Does Nassau
16 Community College have the same policy?

17
18 **MS. BOYLE:**

19 Yes.

20
21 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

22 So you'd probably work very closely with those two community
23 colleges?

24
25 **MS. BOYLE:**

26 Absolutely. And especially because we encourage our families to --
27 even if their long-term goal is something that would be a
28 bachelor's degree, we would encourage them to start with an
29 associate's degree, go to SUNY, Suffolk Community College or Nassau
30 Community College, obtain your full associate's degree; and then
31 take that to -- onto a four-year college. Because then once you
32 have your full associate's degree, whatever school you transfer to
33 has to accept all of your credits. But if you don't complete the
34 degree and then you choose to move onto a second four-year school,
35 the school can pick and choose which courses -- which credits
36 they're going to accept. And then that could mean the student has
37 to redo certain courses or would have to take out loans because
38 they would run out of the grant money.

39
40 **LEG. BARRAGA:**

41 Thank you very much.

42
43 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

44 This Legislature had a few years ago enacted the Housing Our
45 Homeless Heroes Act, a part of which sought to address housing
46 discrimination against our veterans. You had mentioned that even
47 once a veteran has a HUD-VASH voucher, the challenge really just
48 begins going out and finding housing, obtaining housing, going
49 through the process. Credit, of course, is an issue. I'm
50 wondering if in your experience have you heard or are familiar with
51 instances of housing discrimination against our veterans for
52 reasons that are related to their veteran or service status going
53 above and beyond just basic worthiness?

54
55 **MS. BOYLE:**

56 I would say there's good news in that area; and that what most

1 HUD-VASH recipients come up against is the discrimination against
2 Section 8. And Section 8 has a reputation everywhere you go. And
3 so many landlords don't want to take on a Section 8 tenant. And
4 they have all sorts of negative stereotypes that come to mind. So
5 for us I know that when we've worked with HUD-VASH veteran
6 households trying to secure an apartment on the open market, that
7 we would focus on the veteran housing piece. And we would call it,
8 you know, a veteran housing voucher. And that veteran language
9 actually opened doors; where as a straight Section 8 voucher would
10 never have been able to get in.

10:01AM

11
12 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

13 Good. Good. Anybody else? Very good. Well, thank you. Thank
14 you for being with us. I know my colleagues would agree that this
15 is helpful information. And thank you for the materials. I know
16 that in my office and all of our offices as we continue to have
17 this conversation with, you know, so many of our constituents, I
18 know that they're going to find this information very helpful.

19
20 **MS. BOYLE:**

21 Thank you. Thanks very much. I also -- in the packets, those
22 fliers that talk about each of our different programs, those are
23 the actual fliers that the HUD-VASH workers are giving to the
24 veteran households so that they can contact us directly if they're
25 interested.

26
27 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

28 Very good. We wish you every continued success.

29
30 **MS. BOYLE:**

31 Thank you.

32
33 **CHAIRPERSON STERN:**

34 Okay. Anybody else? All right. There being no other items on the
35 agenda, we are adjourned. Thank you.

36
37
38 **THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 10:02 AM**
39 **{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**
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