

VETERANS AND SENIORS COMMITTEE
OF THE
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

Minutes

A regular meeting of the Veterans and Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held at the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York, in the Rose Y. Caracappa Auditorium on Thursday, January 24, 2002 at 9:30 a.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Legislator William Lindsay, Chairman
Legislator Cameron Alden
Legislator Andrew Crecca
Legislator Lynne Nowick

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Fred Pollert, Director, Budget Review Office
Tom Donovan, Legislative Aide to Presiding Officer Tonna
Terry Pearsall, Legislative Aide to Legislator Lindsay
Warren Greene, Legislative Aide to Legislator Alden
Ed Hogan, Legislative Aide to Legislator Nowick
Nicole DeAngelo, IR/County Executive's Office
Art Lozeau, Director, Veterans Service Agency
Eleanor Scott, Long Island Senior Games
Lou Kothe, Long Island Senior Games

NOT PRESENT:

Legislator Martin Haley

Minutes Taken By:

Kimberly Castiglione, Legislative Secretary

(The meeting was called to order at 9:30 a.m.)

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

We are going to start this meeting this morning on time, not on legislative time, on actual time. So, would everybody rise for the Pledge. The Pledge will be said by Legislator Crecca.

(Salutation)

This should be a relatively quick meeting this morning. We don't have any legislation to consider. We do have a couple of people that would like to speak. The first is a presentation by Mr. Arthur Lozeau, Director of Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency. Arthur?

MR. LOZEAU:

I am Art Lozeau, the Director of the Veterans Service Agency. I became the Director this past June. Prior to that I was a veterans service officer running claims, etceteras. What I would like to do this morning is explain the agency and then field any questions you might have.

The Veterans Service Agency was established really in 1945 based under New York Law, and has assisted Veterans in Suffolk County ever since. Its main mission is to assist Veterans and their family members and survivors to obtain all the benefits that are due them. We also have ancillary missions which are ceremonial, honoring Veterans, as well as outreach to Veterans and educating of the benefits due.

To put a scope on this, Suffolk County has about 126,000 Veterans by the latest VA figures, that is about nine percent of the New York State Veterans population, and a macro amount

of dollars. That represents \$90 million that comes into Suffolk County in the form of compensation, education benefits, vocational rehabilitation, etceteras – including insurance and indemnities.

My agency has two offices, one in Riverhead and one in the County Center in Hauppauge. I have a total of ten people, five of which are veterans service officers, but I am short one at this time. The budget is about \$365,000.

You have a flyer in front of you and you can refer to that if you wish. I will just point out that we as agencies come under the Human Services Division in the Office of the County Executive.

I want to give an item of framework as to how we operate in the County with relation to the federal agencies. The main federal agency obviously is the Department of Veterans Affairs with its main office in New York City. That is the benefits side. The health side is Northport VA Medical Center in Northport. The two are independent. We deal primarily with the claims side in order to get claims benefits for our Veterans. We also obviously deal with the doctors at Northport in getting the medical evidence to help prove the claim.

With regard to the benefits side of the agency's work, on the inside of the flyer we have them broken out as to federal benefits and State benefits and what we provide here in Suffolk County. Now, I will just point out a couple of these. The primary one really is the disability compensation benefit where a Veteran who has a disability because of a service will then put in for a compensation for it. I would like to tell you that there are people in the New York Regional Office in the VA that are just sitting there waiting to approve these, but it is not that simple. We have got to come up with a good case to prove that the injury or disability is indeed caused by this service. This particularly is true when it comes to Agent Orange cases and Gulf War Illness and so forth.

With regard to pension, this primarily deals with those Veterans who are low income. If they served in a wartime they will get a boost to their income. Unfortunately, it is not as large as we would like it to be. In other words, if a Veteran has an income under \$759 a month, if he served in wartime they will bring it up to \$759. They will also do the same for a surviving spouse. Then there are all the other benefits, home loan guarantees, etceteras.

The benefits for the survivors is a major element, particularly for those – it is called dependency indemnity compensation. This is when the Veteran has died of a service connected disability. We get a large amount of them – a fair amount, I should say, of Agent Orange cases, etceteras. The burial benefits. We provide the procedures for them to do that. Hospital care. We get a number of questions about hospital care and usually my role in this is resolved in whatever problem some might have with Northport and I deal directly with the Director on those issues.

With regard to State benefits, there are the blind annuity for Veterans who have been blinded because of service and various other items here. I will point out the thruway permit, that is for someone who has lost a limb and then can get free access to the New York Thruway. These are the type of benefits they have. There are some tuition items given by New York State for those that have died because of war.

Then the other benefits are the other things that Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency does are listed here. If you have questions on them you can ask, I am not going to go down each one.

On the other side of the Agency it is the outreach side I will call it, those things that are really other than for the actual benefit that is going to be due a Veteran. We have a number of things. Obviously there is the recognition ceremonies. We have an annual salute to women Veterans, salute to Korean War Veterans. We just dedicated our World War II monument, which is a very impressive monument. We maintain a Veterans Honor Registry. In front of you, you should have a little card. That is the web address to our registry. This is where a Veteran or the family can register and be put on the internet and you can access it

by home. You can include a photo and a little bit about him. It is a relatively popular registry.

We maintain a small museum that I believe some of you saw at the World War II monument or whenever you go into the Dennison Building. We slowly developed that.

Other items that we are involved with is the County Executive – what I am directly involved with is the County Executive Suffolk County Veterans Advisory Committee where we advise the County Executive on matters that are of help to Veterans and their families. That is composed of Veterans that come from all of the various organizations. There are well over 100 posts and chapters of Veterans in Suffolk County. The major organizations nominate someone to be on this committee.

I myself go to speak to various organizations. In fact, I am speaking to a VFW Post tonight in Quogue, and go down in more detail in these type of benefit questions. Of course, anything else that Veterans would have. And I maintain a mailing to these posts and chapters in an effort to get the information out on benefits and other matters of interest to Veterans.

I am a member of the Northport Medical Center Veterans Advisory Board. I am also a member of the New York State Long Island Nursing Home Veterans Advisory Board. I will point out, because it is mistaken quite a bit, the State Nursing Home at Stony Brook, the Long Island State Nursing Home, is a New York State Nursing Home. It is not a federal level Northport type of a medical center/nursing home.

Finally, we run the annual Toys For Tots programs and Veterans organizations help us collect those and then we get them distributed to organizations.

The only other thing I would like to mention, and there is a piece of legislation that is about to be laid on the table, it has to do with providing the partial property tax exemption to the Gold Star Parents. That for years has been – been attempting to pass the Legislature. It finally was signed by Governor Pataki last year, and then the Suffolk County Legislature has now got to approve the resolution that allows the towns to provide this partial property tax exemption for town and County taxes to the Gold Star Parents – someone whose son or daughter was killed in wartime. I will just add it is not financially – a financial impact. We have a mailing list of in the Long Island area of about 45 Gold Star Parents, so it is not a lot. But it is a meaningful gesture for them to, in fact, benefit of the partial property tax reduction.

Those are the only comments that I have about the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency. Do you have any questions, sir?

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

Does any of the committee have any questions?

LEGISLATOR CRECCA:

I just have one comment, and it is really more just to make you aware, Art, that I have sat down with, informally, with some of the Vietnam Vets and one of the things, and I have mentioned it to Bob Smith and I will mention it to you now. I am going to be looking into forming a small committee, and I will talk to you more about it, too, and to let the other members know, looking at the possibility of adding some type of memorial to Armed Forces Plaza for the Vietnam Veterans. Now we have World War II represented there, the Korean War, it might be appropriate to recognize those Veterans since we have so many. I think Suffolk County has the largest population of Vietnam Vets in the nation. That is my understanding at least, and I think it might be appropriate to at least examine that and the possibility of a memorial there. I will certainly keep my fellow members of this committee advised, too, but I spoke informally to Richard {Kitzen} and Bob Smith and look forward to working with you on that also.

MR. LOZEAU:

That would be excellent. We are finally glad to get the World War II monument up, and so having one of those as a complement would be excellent.

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

Thank you for your presentation. I just wanted to ask you, you may or may not know the answer to this, would you know how many County employees were called up to active duty in the past few months?

MR. LOZEAU:

I don't have that.

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

You wouldn't know.

MR. LOZEAU:

No, I don't. I will get an answer.

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

Okay. And if you could, if you had an idea of the pay status at that time also.

MR. LOZEAU:

The pay of the ones that were called up?

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

Yes.

MR. LOZEAU:

Because that would be based on their rank.

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

Okay.

LEGISLATOR CRECCA:

She means, I think, whether the County is still paying.

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

If they were called up already to active duty.

LEGISLATOR CRECCA:

I think she means their status on the County payroll.

MR. LOZEAU:

Okay. I will find out what I can. There is legislation that allows that when they are called up they – if they are not getting the County pay they had, that they would raise it up to that level. But I will get those numbers.

MR. HOGAN:

Fred might know about the supplements to active duty personnel once they extend past all their sick time and everything. Fred, what does the County do?

MR. POLLERT:

That was a debate. With the Gulf War a special resolution was adopted. There was some question whether or not that was going to carry over or not, but the County was extending the benefits beyond the 30 days. Paul Sabatino would have the most current update. I know that he was looking at drafting some revised legislation. I don't know what the status of it is.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

Another suggestion that I might make is maybe we should bring in Labor Relations at the

next meeting to assess how many people are involved and what kind of financial impact we are talking about.

MR. POLLERT:

One of the difficulties is that there was turnover in the Department of Labor Relations and that was part of the difficulty. There was a question of interpretation whether or not the resolution that was adopted by the Legislature previously was clear enough and would control in this circumstance. And again, Paul Sabatino was involved in the research to determine from a legal point of view if the previous resolution would be carrying over or not.

LEGISLATOR CRECCA:

Maybe we could talk to Paul and find out if there is legislation there and it is not currently sponsored, maybe the committee could sponsor it. So I would ask the Chairman to look into that.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

The only thing before the Director leaves, and just for a point of information to both the committee and the Director. To my knowledge, we have the first soldier coming home from Afghanistan. He is a Long Island boy, he lives in my district. I have asked him to come to the Legislature next week that we might give him a proclamation, a nice young man. Thank you.

The next speaker is Mrs. Eleanor Scott, the Director of Long Island Senior Games.

MS. SCOTT:

My name is Eleanor Scott. I am the Executive Director of the Long Island Senior Games. Our very brief history and some comments about the games, what we do. We are approximately five years into forming the games. We are about five years since we just started the games, in fact, almost exactly. We have had three marvelously successful programs for the senior games.

It started because New York State has senior games and the whole United States has senior games, and so we wanted to have our own here on Long Island because we have such a huge population of seniors. So we developed the games and they gathered a fantastic staff of people, directors, to help. We had the first one at Farmingdale University and the second one at Nassau Community and the third one at Suffolk Community College. We have had over 1,000 seniors who have come and participated in various forms. They have been eminently successful. In fact, we have many more seniors come to our Long Island games than many states have, many whole states that have senior games. So we are considered a local game.

We are just an independent corporation. We have no one except ourselves that govern us, but we have a wonderful staff of people who are very experienced. We try to offer incentive to be healthy. We try to offer people a possibility and an opportunity to come and participate themselves in 22 major sports or 10 minor sports or fitness classes. And so what we are saying is come and see what other people are doing. You don't have to be a great athlete. A lot of our people are beginners, the first time they've tried it, particularly women who back when they were kids there really wasn't much for women at that time, and now there is. And we are happy to be perhaps the first to offer it to them. And many men who were very athletic when they were in high school or college have stopped, so we continue that. We continue offering this.

A lot of things we do involve just walking and swimming and golf and things that people are doing anyway but now they have a chance to come in with their peers, which is very important, because they are only competing within their own age group, within a five year age group. So if you are 53, you are only competing against 50 to 54 year old people in your own gender. And if you are 80 you are not going to compete against a 50 year old.

We offer all of the major sports, bicycling, race walking, track and field, swimming, tennis, golf, bowling, bocci, horseshoes, I could go on and on, we have many. This year we are adding a, well, maybe, this year we are hoping to put in a ballroom dancing or a ballroom

dance competition. So we are always trying to add and only maintain those sports that are active. So that is what we do.

I would like to tell you a little bit about – I told you about the origin and the highlights. We are trying to keep people out of the nursing home because that costs them a lot of money, it costs you money, the government, and they don't want to be there. So we are giving them an alternative, get up, start to do something that can appeal to you that you can become involved in. We are offering fun. We really love to have fun.

We are governed by a board of 15 – 19 directors, all of whom are very, very experienced. They are retired college professors, athletic directors, nurses, and been in the field and they know what they are doing. We do a great professional job. We are affiliated, loosely, with the Empire State Senior Games. We work hand and glove. We work with the National Senior Games Association, and they help us, we help them in a way, and we also work with the Department of Aging, with senior centers and other places. We are very involved in sports organizations. So, that is basically what we do and if you have any questions when we are done I would be happy to answer any specific questions that you have.

We have this past year been at Suffolk Community College. Most of our athletes are from Suffolk County. The facility there is wonderful for us. It has almost all the things we need. The Department of Parks also has been very helpful offering us a golf course for our golfers. So, we are in a wonderful situation. We have a website, we all have e-mail and we communicate, and I think that is pretty much what we do.

We do have a problem. I am going to let Lou Kothe, our Associate Executive Director, explain that.

MR. KOTHE:

Our problem currently is a financial problem. We encountered a great deal of difficulty this past year or for these upcoming games, which will take place in May, as they do every year, coming up with the financial resources we require to run these games. We don't have an extensive budget, but we in the past have received, besides donations and some registration fees, we have received a variety of grants. And in inquiring about those grants in the past several months we have been for the most part told that because of 9/11, because of the economic situation, it might be impossible or those grants from the past might be cut a great deal. That primarily is the reason for us appearing here this morning.

About six weeks ago, I guess, somewhere in there, I had gone to Legislator Alden's office. He has been very instrumental in trying to steer us in ways in which we can possibly gain enough funds to run these games. We were at a point in time, and I guess we are really still there, whereby we were thinking in terms of honestly having to cancel this year's games because of the financially strapped situation we are presently in.

There have been some things forthcoming that will ease our burden a little bit, but primarily we are here this morning to appeal to you folks and to see if there be any financial aid that you might be able to provide or steer us in directions where financial aid might be forthcoming. We have constantly not only looked to government agencies for funds, but also seek corporate sponsorships and certainly donations. Much of that money it appears this year has sort of dried up and that is where we stand as far as our financial difficulties are concerned.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:
Legislator Alden.

LEGISLATOR ALDEN:

I think that recently they had some real good news. Originally I think Suffolk Community College had charged somewhere in the 14 or \$15,000 range to rent the facilities. I will let Lou say how much are they going to charge you this year?

MR. KOTHE:

A maximum of \$3,000.

LEGISLATOR ALDEN:

So that is going to help them a real lot. But I think there is still a shortfall of around \$25,000.

MR. KOTHE:

Yes, 20 to 25,000.

LEGISLATOR ALDEN:

What I would like to propose is maybe us as the Vets and Seniors Committee, if this year we can be the main sponsor of the Senior Games, and that way we'll let it happen this year, and then allow Suffolk County to be a sponsor of the games, but in a lesser degree next year and the year after, and we will hook them up with some corporate sponsors and things like that. I have already starting like giving them some suggestions and some phone numbers and things like that and I believe that KeySpan is going to come through with something, right?

MR. KOTHE:

We have contacted them, been in touch with them. I understand it might be a couple of weeks before we hear back from them in terms of us even meeting with them or them requiring us to supply certain information to them or whatever. But we certainly have been in contact with them.

LEGISLATOR ALDEN:

But the corporate sponsorship that will come forward probably would not be in time to actually save these games this year, so with the Chairman's permission, if we could ask Fred to maybe find 20, \$25,000 somewhere and allow Suffolk County to be the sponsor of the Senior Games this year.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

Well, we would need an offset to the \$25,000, which isn't a lot of money, but how does the rest of the committee feel about it?

LEGISLATOR CRECCA:

Let's let Budget Review take a look at it to see if there is an offset that works. The budget is tight this year.

MR. POLLERT:

At this point in time the budget is extremely tight. We just adopted the budget, so at this point we have already gone through wherever we felt that there were surpluses in the budget to use them to offset the property tax increase. We can certainly look at the budget again. There are areas of the budget where with executive management we may be able to come up with that amount of money.

One of the difficulties is, even if we come up with an offset, we are going to need some sort of an agreement from the County Executive's Office as well because of the narrow timelines. You don't want to adopt a resolution only to have it vetoed across the street. And I know that Ken Weiss has been reluctant to come up with areas of offset.

One potential area of offset could be in the Social Security area. If the County Executive intends to maintain a County hiring freeze we should be able to come up with an offset in that area.

LEGISLATOR ALDEN:

Mr. Chairman. Through the Chair. I think we have a representative from Mr. Gaffney's office here, so if that message could go back and we could start working together to try to find – it is approximately 20, \$25,000 that will save the Senior Games this year and allow them to take place.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

We are just coming up with an idea. Let us discuss it with Fred and we'll get back to you. What is the timeframe of – I mean, if no money comes forward, you are going to have to cancel the games?

MR. KOTHE:

It still is a great possibility. The games actually take place May 15th to the 19th. As Eleanor already explained, they are done in Olympic style, so the various events take place various days, culminating on Sunday the 19th. Normally by this point in time we have mailed out and distributed through post offices, libraries, senior centers, etceteras, our registration forms. We are just in the process – we have had it all together, but we are just in the process of having these printed now. Normally they have already been in people's possession – or going out to people at this point in time, the end of January.

With the time lag involved here in the printing and us putting them together and getting them mailed, we are talking about roughly a six week period, I believe, before they will go out. So that brings us to approximately the middle of March, I guess –

MS. SCOTT:

Beginning of March.

MR. KOTHE:

Beginning of March. And again, we require them back like a week before the games actually take place. Because of the financial difficulties, unfortunately, we delayed in trying to get these things printed, and also obviously it has delayed us quite a bit in terms of –

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

But my point is that we will have a month or six weeks to see if we can put this together to help you out.

MS. SCOTT:

Yes, sir.

LEGISLATOR CRECCA:

I have just a question, Mr. Chairman. Have you approached Nassau County for help at all?

MS. SCOTT:

I have. I have written letters to every Legislator, Assemblyperson, and all of the Senators. So, yes, I have written. I do have people who are Nassau residents who are our athletes calling their Legislators, their Nassau Legislators.

LEGISLATOR ALDEN:

I think it is safe to say that, you know, when they came into my office we explored that. We are not really going to have much help from Nassau County.

LEGISLATOR CRECCA:

I didn't expect that we did. I just wanted to make sure that at least there was direct reach out to –

MS. SCOTT:

Absolutely.

LEGISLATOR CRECCA:

Because it is Long Island Games. And while I doubt very much that Nassau County will come across with anything, I don't want to exclude them from the process. I would like to see them do something, even if it is token.

LEGISLATOR ALDEN:

They have reached out to their Assemblymen and New York State Senators and Congress. They are hoping for some offsetting grants that way, too.

MR. KOTHE:

May I say something? The preponderance of our athletes do come from Suffolk County. Not to say that we don't get many from Nassau and also the City and also some from out of state. But the preponderance of athletes do come from this area also. Sometimes we are asking for funds where we don't have a large constituency of athletes present in those particular areas, not that we haven't tried and asked.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

Just to clarify. The total shortfall is \$25,000, right?

MR. KOTHE:

Correct.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

And, Cameron, you think there is still possibilities of getting some corporate money or something from the State as well, so we might not even have to come up with the whole 25,000.

LEGISLATOR ALDEN:

No. There is a possibility of getting a little corporate and some Senators and Assemblymen are going to get back to me on whether they are going to be able to get something. But because of the timeframes it is really crucial that even as a backup plan that we have something that we can go forward with.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

Let us work on it and kick it around among ourselves. We will talk to Fred.

MS. SCOTT:

We appreciate this very much, and our seniors would appreciate it. They really look forward to the games and we would hate to have to cancel it, because once it gets canceled, then it fizzles and I don't know if we would ever resume them because we have impetus now, but I don't know that we could continue it.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

Okay. Let us see what we can do.

MS. SCOTT:

Thank you very, very much.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

You are welcome.

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

I just want to ask one question.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

Go ahead. I'm sorry.

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

How do people get involved in that? Do you have pamphlets?

MS. SCOTT:

Yes, we do. Well, we send out a series of postcards. We sent 18,000 postcards last time. We send out 10,000 applications. We –

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

And who do they go out to?

MS. SCOTT:

Well, we only have a mailing list of about 4,500, but we also send to all the bowling – we have a bowling alley connection.

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

Okay. Maybe before you leave you can speak to Ed Hogan, my Aide. I would love to get some information on that. I think it is a great thing and let me commend you on it, both of you.

MS. SCOTT:

Thank you. We are hoping for – we are getting connected with some more publicity, and the more publicity we get – every time it appears anywhere I get, you know, 30 phone calls. And we follow-up on everything. We are very professional.

LEGISLATOR NOWICK:

Wonderful.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

It would really make sense if you had some brochures, not only for us, but really for every one of the Legislators, because –

MS. SCOTT:

Everybody has been sent one.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

I mean, we all have newsletters and stuff. It would be a good thing for us to advertise.

MR. SCOTT:

I will get you some additional ones.

MR. KOTHE:

We have some of what we call the {results} booklet. There are several different things that do go out. Each of the Legislators has received letters from Eleanor. There was a letter sent fairly recently and Legislator Alden incorporated his cover letter with it. These have been mailed to every Legislator, both in Nassau and Suffolk. The registration forms, I believe, are also mailed to you folks. These things have at least crossed everybody's desk as far as I know.

MS. SCOTT:

They also go out to every health club. I personally go out to the libraries and make speeches. I go to every club that is a track and field club and make speeches. I go to senior centers and make presentations. I spend a lot of my time making presentations, which is fine.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

You know, just another suggestion. This is a very attractive program. Did you give any thought maybe to having corporate sponsors advertise in this?

MS. SCOTT:

We have given a lot of thought and a lot of time and effort.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

There is an awful lot of people that make a lot of money off of seniors, you know, from health care facilities –

MS. SCOTT:

I've tried, so far basically unsuccessfully.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

You can't get anybody to advertise.

MS. SCOTT:

That's correct. And I need help with that. If I could find a way to get that accomplished, we'd love to include them in there. I mean, we have the Outback Steak House as a – they give a free barbecue. They come over and prepare it and cook it and serve everybody and everybody loves it. That is their donation, is their time and their food. So, you don't see anybody basically in there, and it is not from a lack of trying, believe me.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

Legislator Alden.

LEGISLATOR ALDEN:

Mr. Chairman, with your permission, I am also on the Parks Committee and that meets later today. Maybe we can coordinate with the Parks Committee, too, because these two committees are probably very appropriate.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

Thank you very much for coming and please stay in touch with us and let's see what we can do.

MS. SCOTT:

Absolutely. Thank you, sir. Any time.

CHAIRMAN LINDSAY:

Is there anyone else who would like to address the committee? Seeing none, motion to adjourn.

(The meeting was adjourned at 10:05 a.m.)

{ } Denotes Spelled Phonetically