

**VETERANS & SENIORS COMMITTEE**  
**OF THE**  
**SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE**

**Minutes**

A regular meeting of the Veterans & Seniors 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 March 13, 2007.

**Members Present:**

Legislator Steven H. Stern, Chairman  
Legislator Jack Eddington, Vice-Chair  
Legislator Cameron Alden  
Legislator Jon Cooper (not present)  
Legislator Jay H. Schneiderman

**Also In Attendance:**

Tim Laube, Clerk of the Legislature  
Verna Donnan, Budget Review Office  
Deborah Harris, Aide to Legislator Stern  
Holly Rhodes-Teague, Director/Office for the Aging  
Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency  
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Leader  
Debra Alloncius, Legislative Rep for AME  
Paul Arfin, Intergenerational Strategies  
Brendan Chamberlain, County Executive's Office  
All Other Interested Parties

**Minutes Taken By:**

Diana Kraus - Court Stenographer

**(THE MEETING COMMENCED AT 1:13 P.M.)**

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Vets and Seniors will come to order. I would ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Alden.

***(Salutation)***

I'd ask everybody to please remain standing and join us in a moment of silence keeping all of our very brave men and women fighting for us overseas in your thoughts and prayers.

***(Moment of Silence)***

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you. Good afternoon. We are light on agenda today but full of very important information. With so much going on all around our country and an issue really grabbing the headlines, and that is our returning veterans and the care or unfortunately the lack thereof that they receive. This has always been a very important issue but critical now more than ever. And so with that mind, first I'm going to ask Tom Ronayne to step up and join us today. Tom, welcome.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, members. I had spoken with the Chairman's office mid-week last week when some of the issues that we're all familiar with now had first started coming to light, specifically the items that we're seeing in the media regarding both Walter Reed Medical Center and the Veterans Administration in general. I prepared a statement, which I believe has been distributed, that I think summarizes our position as much as it does the issue. So if you'd bear with me, you all have -- Jim, would you like me to read this for the record?

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Yes, if you could.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

Thank you, as always, for the opportunity to speak today. I do extend to you the apologies of Mr. Joseph Sledge, the Public Information Officer for the Northport VA Medical Center. He had been invited to attend today. Unfortunately, because of the volume of activity that this issue is generating, he has a difficult time getting off campus at the medical center at this time. He did ask that I extend to the Chairman and to the committee an invitation to visit the site at any time for a full guided tour and a very open question and answer session. So that opportunity, that invitation is extended on behalf of the VA, and if you at any time would like to let me know when and if you'd like to take him up on that offer I'll make the necessary arrangements.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

I think what we'll try to do, maybe at the conclusion of the meeting, maybe members of the committee will try to get together and coordinate schedules and see if we can take our time and go perhaps as a group together to the VA and take that tour together.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

Okay. Thank you. As we have all seen in the media, there is a great deal of attention being focused on VA at this time. There are actually several issues being highlighted in the press, and for the purposes of clarity I would like to explain some of the issues, some of the differences here.

Walter Reed Medical Center, Walter Reed Army Medical Center, is just that. It is a U.S. Army Medical Center. They are not any part of nor are they operated by the VA. The VA itself has also been scrutinized, but I think that there is a great deal of confusion when it comes to separating the two. I was, as were all of you I'm sure, upset at the reports, though, that returning troops were receiving anything less than first rate care. I can say that the reputation of Walter Reed as a world

class facility, while presently tainted, largely continues to be the prevailing opinion of those in the vets and health care communities.

One of the issues raised was the conditions of the physical plant, the building and structures used to house our troops. The primary care facility at Walter Reed, while identified for closure and relocation two years ago under the BRAC Commission, has and does continue to provide excellent care for these troops. The new hospital is being built at the site of the Bethesda Naval Hospital and at the time of the completion of the new building's construction, Walter Reed will be closed and relocated to that new facility.

The issues of the rats and the poor living conditions was primarily taking place at off base housing that troops were moved into after their inpatient needs had been met. While there is no excuse for the images that we saw on the news, I think it is important to put in proper perspective what is happening and what is not. Unfortunately, what we saw is disgraceful and should never be allowed to occur. That should not be tolerated for one moment on any level. Unfortunately, what appears to have happened was somebody within the Walter Reed administration who is responsible for the contracting of off site housing for the troops, when they had completed their inpatient care and had been moved out to essentially rooming housings that they would reside in to allow for beds to be open at Walter Reed, somebody went out and contracted with property owners with unacceptable conditions.

This never should have been allowed to occur. I think we have all seen that a number of heads have rolled for this. It's not an excuse. It should not have occurred and the damage that it does in terms of the public opinion of these wonderful facilities and the good work that they do is justifiably tainted.

With regard to the VA specifically here at our Northport VA Medical Center, the news is better. There are currently at least two investigations taking place at Northport. These are both Federal investigations, one from the house in the Senate and another from the Veterans Administration Inspector General's Office. Both of these investigations were initiated in response to the Walter Reed incidents.

VA and Northport specifically has been the focus of media attention over the last few years on several different fronts. I'm pleased to say mostly positive. Northport has been the feature of articles in both local and national media outlets, lauding its successes and initiatives being seen there. The quality of care, while not perfect, is considered excellent. We do not always hear -- we will always hear of patients having negatives experiences. Unfortunately, while those cases do exist, Northport tries aggressively to remedy patient complaints. We in my office have a strong working relationship with both the staff and the administration at Northport and consider them to be both professional and competent.

VA facilities, like all medical centers and hospitals, are required to maintain certain standards and accreditations. Not unlike other facilities of its type and size, there have been issues identified during inspections and reviews over the years. The problems are always addressed timely and I'm happy to say that over the years the incidents of gigs, as they're known, has been on the decline. I am not attempting to paint a picture of a perfect system here. To the contrary, any system as large and complex as the VA, certainly Northport, is going to have its fair share of problems. The key, in my opinion, is not to have an unreasonable expectation of perfection, but to have a reasonable expectation of how and how quickly these problems are identified, remedied, and mechanisms put in place to prevent the same things from recurring.

Northport, for example, is in a state of what is referred to as constant readiness. The Joint Commission of Hospital Investigation and Accreditations, I have that acronym wrong, is an inspection that every licensed, accredited medical care facility undergoes. These accrediting inspections are generally conducted with several months prior notice about every three years.

Facilities are given a timetable and inspection dates for which they are able to prepare. Northport, however, is in a constant state of readiness for these grueling inspections. Few facilities, despite best efforts, I think, can make a similar statement. Northport is, and I had this reverified verbally by Mr. Sledge this morning, is in a constant state of readiness. They are prepared at any given moment for the Joint Commission to come in and conduct their inspections without notice. That's a pretty remarkable standard for them to hold themselves to.

To go off-track for a moment, I think at the last committee meeting I also reported that Northport, along with the Fort Hamilton Facility and the New York City Facility on 23rd Street, have recently been identified by the British Government as being so extraordinary and exceptional in the level of care provided that the British Government is preparing a delegation to visit the area and to spend time. And I'm not talking hours or days, but they are planning on spending at least several weeks at these facilities to observe how they operate and how they perform the services that they do because of the reputation and because of the standard that they hold themselves to. So for a foreign government, especially a government as developed and advanced as the British Government, we are not talking about a third country world coming in here to see what we do, I think that speaks loudly to the successes at Northport.

We in Suffolk County take our commitment to our veterans very seriously and the care provided to them at the VA is no exception. When a wrong is committed or a problem exists we work with both the veteran and the VA to correct those problems. I think access and education are probably the two best ways of insuring that high standards, which we have an obligation to provide to our veterans, are maintained.

Toward that end, I would like to again extend to each of you, Mr. Chairman and committee members, an invitation to visit the Veterans Administration Medical Center at Northport and take part in a guided tour of the facility to see for yourselves and to question anything regarding the facility that you like. At this time I would be happy to answer any questions. Obviously I don't speak on behalf of the VA, but any questions that I can answer I would be happy to.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Tom, you said that the facility is in a constant state of readiness and they're always ready to go through an inspection process, even on a moment's notice. To the best of your knowledge, and I understand that you don't speak for the VA, but has there ever been that kind of a surprise visit or are they always scheduled months in advance?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

I don't think that the Joint Commission on Accreditation has done one of those spot visits. They have had Inspection General teams pop in on them unannounced and conduct inspections. Mr. Sledge also used the phrase to me that they welcome the scrutiny. Northport feels that they have nothing to hide. They have nothing to defend themselves against, that they welcome the scrutiny, they welcome the transparency and they would like very much for that fact to be known. They don't want the perception to be that they are trying to conceal anything or to prevent anybody from having access to the facility in order to be able to gauge for themselves whether or not these conditions are being accurately stated.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Questions? Tom, I'm wondering, would you be able to -- do you have any new information -- would you be able to update the committee on the ongoing efforts, services to be offered to veterans out on the east end?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

I spoke to the VA Director's Office yesterday. The documents that we referred to at the last meeting, specifically the floor plans, the layouts, the specifications and the guidelines for use that we would have to build to conform to have now been completed. They are being reviewed by the Facility Director. We expect him to release them today or tomorrow. So I would hope -- I would

have expected that we would have had them prior to today, but based on what I was told yesterday, I think that we would see them today or tomorrow.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

So that's something that we will be able to consider perhaps at our next session.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

Yes.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

And can you let everybody know about the event coming up?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

I've spoken several times in the past about the Homeless Veterans Stand Down. Again, Nassau County has done to date five of these events. They are remarkably successful. There is certainly a need that exists in the county, our county as with any other county, through service of population that is historically very difficult to service. The homeless population, by now these folks are generally aware that services do exist, that there are places that they can go, and for any number of reasons choose to remain in the environments that they are in.

For purposes of homeless, the VA and we use a definition that maybe is a little bit more liberal than some others. We consider homelessness in the veterans community to include not only those who are actually homeless and living in the woods or living in their automobile and so forth, but also living in a transient environment, living in shelters, living on a day to day basis not knowing necessarily whether they'll have a place to sleep tomorrow. That veteran being in danger of being homeless, we include him in that definition because they as often as not do find themselves in that situation.

The purpose of a Stand Down is to provide a non-threatening environment where these homeless veterans for a day can come in, and by definition is nothing more than taking the frontline troops in out of the field, bringing them to the rear where they can get some respite. They can take a shower or get hopefully a decent meal and receive services that they don't necessarily have access to while they're out on the line.

The same concept applies here. What we trying to do is get these guys in out of the field and expose them to the services that you see listed on the flier that was distributed in addition to many others. We're going to be doing blood pressure drives, we're going to be doing a variety of screenings, we're going to have employment opportunities available, we're going to be feeding them, haircuts, showers. That's all icing on the cake. The real purpose of getting these people into this room on that day is to expose them to the social, the medical, the mental health, the veterans benefits and services to which many -- most of them are entitled but for whatever the reason have not exposed themselves or accessed. We've done some work with some of the veterans organizations. The Disabled American Veterans, for example, are going to provide all of the drivers and transportation to go around the County to the various pick-up and drop-off locations and transport the veterans into the Stand Down.

Again, I use the word non-threatening. The event this year, and I must thank a number of people, but certainly the County Executive when he learned of the fact that these events are able to take place and that we weren't doing them was very, very supportive in pushing and helping to insure that we got the cooperation that we needed. To that end, Commissioner Dormer was gracious enough to offer us the use of the Police Academy to conduct this. That may seem a little out of character with the type of event because one of the reasons that these folks very often won't come in off the street is they haven't paid taxes or filed tax returns, they may have tickets. For any number of reasons a law enforcement environment is not necessarily the most conducive to conducting this type of an event.

The auditorium at the Police Academy, there is not a class going at this time so the police presence is quite low. The words Police Academy don't appear on the building. It's at the Health, Sports and Education Center. Logistically it works for us, geographically it's ideal. It is on the Brentwood Campus of the Community College. In a manner of speaking, all roads lead to Brentwood. It's right there where so many of our parkways, the expressway and major arteries lead into that it's just most conducive to us to have a successful event.

We're projecting about 75 homeless veterans to come through the screening that day. If we provide services to one or two of them I think we have had a successful event. But we've certainly done our job as government officials by exposing these people who are entitled to these services but, again, for whatever the reason are not exposed to accessing them. We in a sense are going to bring the party to them.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

And how is this event being promoted in the community for the maximum participation?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

We've been communicating tirelessly with the Veterans Service Organizations, the American Legions, the DAV's, the AMVET's, the VFW's. We've also been working with the homeless programs that service veterans, the Salvation Army, the United Veterans Beacon House, the vets place in Yaphank, and we're in the process at this time of distributing fliers and posters to -- I'm hoping we're going to put them in all of the DSS centers. We're going to put them in supermarkets on bulletin boards, in diners, anyplace that a homeless person might conceivably make a contact we're going to try and have these posted. Obviously word of mouth in the community is a strong part of this. We're conducting that as a part of our overall outreach program. When we go out into the field we're making people aware that the event is coming. But again, the fliers -- and as we get closer we're hopeful that we'll be able to get some PSA's out too, you know, in the print and in the radio markets. That would also serve getting the information.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

We'll also make sure that each member and their staffs get a copy of this. Maybe we can all use our best efforts in our district offices to determine how best to get this word out in our communities throughout the County.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

I'd be very grateful. Obviously I look forward to seeing all of you at the Stand Down if you have the ability to spend a few moments and stop in on us. It really is a very touching event. It's not really what you would expect. When you walk in there and you -- in my experience one of the most memorable experiences I've had, and I have attended a few of these in Nassau, was watching these folks as they arrive at the building, when they sign in at the registration table. And they come in, you know, some of them in the stereotypical image of what you would expect somebody living in the woods for a long time to be, all the way to people who you would never imagine were homeless or in a homeless situation. To watch these people come in, they are accessed to the services. They are given a meal, they're allowed to go through the bins that the clothing drives and the food drives have produced. They get a good meal. They have access to the showers. We have a barber there to give you a shave and a haircut. And I've seen people come into these buildings where observing you coming in, I defy you to identify that person on his way out as being that same person. The transformation is so remarkable in many cases.

The one thing that we can't give them in terms of putting it in a bag and telling you to take it home with you, but it seems that many of them pick it up nonetheless, is when they leave the Stand Down, when they walk out of that building, they've regained a part of their dignity which is a big part of taking that next step and allowing them to allow us to expose them even further to services. I think you would all very much appreciate the nature of what happens while you're in this room and you see -- you see what happens as a result of the hard work of literally -- if we see 75 homeless

veterans, we're expecting that to accomplish that we're going to need about 100 volunteers. The volunteer to veteran ratio is quite high because there's a lot that gets done for these people while they are in that building. So, that being said, I hope you all have an opportunity to at least stick your head in and say hello and see what we're doing over there.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good. Thank you. Tom, thanks so much.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Holly.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Good afternoon. I just wanted to remind everyone about the Home Energy Assistance Program. The program is still open so if you have people in your districts who are in need of assistance with the home energy fuel costs, which we know are all quite high this year, the program is still open. For a household of one it's \$1,764 is the max they can have as income. For a household of two, \$2,307 per month. The benefit would -- the amount of the benefit depends on the type of fuel used and their annual income, and the benefits range from \$165 to \$440. The over 60 population would call our office, which is at 853-8326 for the heat number. For the under 60 they would go through DSS, and that number is 853-8825. We are a sub to DSS and we really only deal with those over age 60. It's a one-time benefit and if they need an emergency benefit, that is a second benefit they could get through the DSS emergency number. But, you know, it's run out when the money runs out, so that's usually in another month or two, but if you know people who are in need please tell them to please call.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Holly, would you be able to comment on the numbers of the people that have taken advantage of this program, specifically this year as opposed to last year?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

I can talk about our office. We've had approximately 5,100 applications come through the office, which is less than the full year last year. And one of the reasons why it's less is because they did -- they did increase -- well, decreased the -- they made it harder to get the benefit, let's put it that way. The incomes changed so less people are eligible for the benefit. So last year I think we did about 6,000 applications and right now we're standing at about 5,100. We'll get more before the season is over, but I don't know if we'll hit the 6,000 mark.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Does your department have the ability to determine as best you can where that drop-off in percentage came from and approximately how many people were affected by the shift in eligibility rules?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

I'd have to go look back at that and see if we're able to do that. Again, we are a sub to DSS. They do the final approvals. We process applications through our office and then the final approval goes over to DSS because they really are the agency that's required to do this program. They just sub it to us to assist with the paperwork. I just wanted to get the word out on that before everybody forgets about it, before the year is over, especially when you see the fuel costs are still jumping through the roof for people.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Good.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Does anybody have questions? Also, May 17th is the luncheon so put that on your calendar.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Where is that going to be?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

That is over at Villa Lombardi. We're pretty much sold out on it already, about 600 seniors. That's a Thursday.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

You will all get invitations to it.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Holly, thanks.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Yup.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Paul.

**MR. ARFIN:**

Good afternoon.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Paul, before you begin, I just need you to state your name for the record.

**MR. ARFIN:**

Sure. My name is Paul Arfin. I'm President of an organization by the name of Intergenerational Strategies. I want to thank the Chairman for inviting me to come today. I introduced him -- I made him familiar with some State Legislation that he felt was important enough to highlight here today. And I think copies were distributed to folks or no?

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Debbie, do we have copies of the State bills? We'll make that now.

**MR. ARFIN:**

Yeah, because I sent the material over last week, and that's cool. But I did want to take a moment to thank you for your leadership in sponsoring the hearings under the Senior Citizen Task Force. We have a lot of unmet needs among our aging here in Suffolk County and they need our attention. And so this opportunity to air some of the concerns is very much appreciated.

Last week I went to Albany and I met with the new Commissioner of the Office for Aging and some of his chief deputies. The other reason for my visit was because Assemblyman Steve Englebright and Senator Marty Golden, both Chairs of their respective Aging Committees, have partnered in a very bipartisan way to put forth seven bills as a package to establish an infrastructure to keep older Americans engaged in the workplace and civic life.

You'll be pleased to know that it is revenue neutral but it does as it says in their press release. It's the infrastructure on which to build a greater sensitivity to the issues concerned with older people who want to enter or reenter the workforce and for older people who want to volunteer part of their time during their retirement years.

The bill creates a Mature Worker Task Force in the State Office for Aging to identify and address legal provisions that may limit opportunities for more mature workers and identify best practices in the private sector for hiring, retaining and retraining mature workers and sets up a clearing house among other things.

One of the parts of the bill that I am particularly pleased with is something that -- that we brought here in Suffolk County to New York State. That is a senior property tax work off bill which mirrors a similar legislation that was passed in Massachusetts several years ago and simply does permit older adults around New York State to get property tax credits for their volunteerism. The State bill is enabling legislation, so if passed, and both Assemblyman Englebright and Senator Golden feel that there's a strong likelihood that it will pass at the State level, it will be up to counties, towns and villages to decide whether to support the program by reducing their property taxes for seniors up to \$750 in -- with the older adult agreeing to provide public services that in effect will have a value of two or three times the amount of the property tax reduction.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Paul, and that volunteer work, whether it's in Massachusetts or as envisioned perhaps here in New York State, is that volunteer work done for the public sector? Is it done for the private or not-for-profit sector?

**MR. ARFIN:**

It's totally up -- if for the sake of discussion next year Suffolk County wanted to do this, it would be up to Suffolk to develop those guidelines. If it -- in some places in Massachusetts it's only within government itself. In some cases a township decides it can be for the Red Cross or the Boy Scouts. In some cases they decide it's to serve at risk youth and the frail elderly. So it's completely up to the locality about what they do, where they do it, and the amount of a property tax rebate, but the State will permit, if the bill passes, up to \$750.

So this is a heads-up that I and others will be here next fall, if not before, talking with you about the possibility of including -- the way it would work is hypothetically you decide you want to do this. Let's just say for a moment you decided on the maximum of \$750 and let's say you wanted 100 people, up to 100 people to, you know, have this available to them. You would need to budget \$75,000 for that purpose with the understanding that in all likelihood there's going to be a tremendous payback in terms of the value of the services rendered by the volunteers. That can range from everything from an administrative role to an accountant to a doctor to whatever, you know, to provide skills as well as kind of menial work. But that's all up to the locality.

The bill also provides a number of other items, an employment training program to help private employers look at their workplace and reorient the workplace so that it's more -- it's friendlier to older people and encourages them to stay in the workplace. It also calls for community and four year colleges to focus on the educational needs of older adults who are seeking to pursue meaningful work. It has an intergenerational mentoring component to it and two or three other pieces that you'll see in the handout.

Again, it's revenue neutral and again, in summary, both sides of the aisle seem like -- are convinced that -- when we ask them who should we lobby, the answer was don't waste your time, you know, it's a done deal.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

When I reviewed the legislation and the summaries going along with it, what struck me was that the underlying theme of so much of what is here was very similar to many of the great ideas to come out of the Commission on Creative Retirement and much of the good work that you and your Commission had done --

**MR. ARFIN:**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

-- last year. So really this is great to see. And it is going to be great to see this go through the process and how we in Suffolk County can best pick and chose how to implement what may be right for us --

**MR. ARFIN:**

Exactly

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

-- here in Suffolk.

**MR. ARFIN:**

Yeah. As you said, in the Commission we recommended that the Department of Labor make some special efforts to reach out to older adults, to take advantage of their services and a whole range of things. So, it's another place where Suffolk has provided some forward thinking, so thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Good. Anybody? All right, very good. Paul, thanks so much. We have no other items on the agenda so I think we're looking good. I'll take a motion --

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

Motion.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

To adjourn by Vice Chairman Eddington.

**LEG. ALDEN:**

Second.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Second by Legislator Alden. We are adjourned. Thank you.

*(The meeting was adjourned at 1:46 P.M.)*