

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 May 8, 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:

William J. Lindsay, Presiding Officer
George Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature
Alicia Howard, Legislative Aide
Verna Donnan, Budget Review Office
Deborah Harris, Aide to Legislator Stern
Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency/Human Services Division
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Leader
Debra Alloncius, Legislative Rep for AME
Fran Siems, Legislative Aide
Brendan Chamberlain, County Executive's Office
Barbara LoMoriello, Chief Deputy of Staff
Thomas Brinson
Doris Salzberg
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken By:

Diana Kraus - Court Stenographer

Minutes Transcribed:

Kim Castiglione, Legislative Aide

(THE MEETING COMMENCED AT 1:11 PM)

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Good afternoon, everybody. The committee on Veterans and Seniors will come to order. I would ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Vice Chairman Eddington.

(Salutation)

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I would ask everyone to please remain standing and take a moment of silence to keep our very brave men and women fighting for our freedoms overseas in your thoughts and prayers.

(Moment of Silence)

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Going first to the public portion today. Did we get a card? Thomas Brinson. Good afternoon. If you could step up to the podium.

MR. BRINSON:

It gives me a chance not to prepare being the first one. I'm Thomas Brinson. I'm the facilitator of the Long Island Chapter 138 of Veterans for Peace. I am a 100% disabled Vietnam Veteran, having served in country in Corp 6768. I initiated my application for PTSD after functioning at a very high level for many years in 2001. In fact, I was a psychotherapist here in Suffolk County providing psychological services to victims of trauma, not only from combat, but from other traumas as well.

My PTSD manifested itself in 2001. Since 2001 I have spent approximately six-and-a-half years going through the process of getting what I am due. I was diagnosed with PTSD 100% ratable up at the Northport VA in 2001. I just got my award after four separate appeals as of last month. That's what wounded warriors deal with.

My wound, like so many of the wounds of those coming back from the war in Iraq, are hidden wounds. From mental health -- and there is one thing that is particularly pernicious and that is the policy of the Department of Defense to force returning soldiers to sign away their rights for future PTSD by admitting that they have a pre-diagnosis of a personality disorder. They didn't have this personality disorder to be recruited, they didn't have this personality disorder to serve honorably in the military, but they have this personality disorder to get discharged, which alleviates their rights forever for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. That is one hidden injury.

The other hidden injury that I think my colleague will speak to also is the injuries from the signature wound with the IED's of this war, and that's TBI, traumatic brain injury. Very difficult to diagnose. Often comes long after the person returns home. Very expensive medical equipment to diagnose.

The third hidden injury that the generation, the cohort of veterans, the men and women of today will face, is the exposure to what is called DU, depleted uranium, which has a shelf life of 4.4 billion years. It will make, according to studies that are not recognized by the government, it will make the chemical exposure of my generation of veterans Agent Orange pale in comparison.

Regarding this, one thing that I hope that you here in the Suffolk County Legislature are aware of is that here in New York State in the last term the New York State Legislature passed a DU testing bill for all returning New York State National Guardsmen and reserve soldiers to be tested for depleted uranium. That bill was passed in the waning moments of Governor Pataki's administration. He did sign it. Hopefully it will be up to the County Legislatures to kind of keep a -- the feet to the fire so to speak, to make sure that the provisions of that are made available and readily assessable to Suffolk County employees. Thank you for your Wounded Warrior initiative. That was what I am here to salute you for.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Mr. Brinson, thank you. I have no other cards. Is there anybody else here that would like to address the committee? Seeing none, we will go to our agenda.

PRESENTATIONS

Let me first welcome our Director of Veterans Services, Tom Ronayne. Director Ronayne, welcome.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good afternoon, Chairman, members. Good afternoon. I guess a couple of things that I would just like to touch on briefly, if we go in chronological order, was prior to the last committee meeting we as a group went and visited the Northport VA facilities. And I would just like to let you know that I have received feedback from the hospital expressing their gratitude that the committee took the time out to visit the site and to express their concerns, to, you know, physically walk the facility, visit the units, speak to the staff, speak to the patients. I was curious if any of the members who attended the walk through had any comments or remarks, problems, issues, anything that they would like me to bring back to the VA.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Just speaking for myself, I guess other members of committee can join in, but I found the staff to be outstanding, able to answer all of our questions. You know, a genuine, caring staff. It seems like our veterans are receiving top-notch care, particularly in light of all of the terrible reports that we have been hearing, you know, other facilities throughout the country. So I know myself I was pleased with the experience that I had in having had the opportunity to speak with so many that are charged with caring for our veterans. So I found it to be positive experience and, you know, was pleased to reinforce that in the conversation that I have had with veterans that live my district that I have been having ongoing conversations with about the care that veterans receive in Suffolk County. So I was pleased. Anybody else?

LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:

Same.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Happy to hear that. I will pass that along.

LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:

Thank you for arranging for the tour. It was a very impressive facility and I was also particularly impressed by the men and women who are serving the veterans, providing medical services. Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you. And also I was asked to convey that is an open invitation any time, whether as a committee, as a legislative body as whole, or as individuals, anybody that would like to visit the facility. It's an open campus to you.

Continuing with the good news, we did hold our first ever Suffolk County Homeless Veterans Stand Down April 20th and I'm very happy to say that it was a success beyond any of our expectations. We saw many more veterans than we had projected or anticipated. The volunteerism really -- really just blew us away. We've now had time to go back and tally the numbers and make sure everything is accurate and the numbers have changed a little bit.

The actual number of veterans served, individual veterans who registered and sought specific services was 82 veterans. Had we hit 50 we would have been thrilled. I think on a very positive and also on a not so positive note, we were able to get the word out and we were able to make a

contact and work with these people who are really sort of living outside of the envelope and don't ordinarily find themselves exposed to the level of services that we're hoping to be able to provide to them.

That being said, the number also, to me anyway, is very troubling because I think it demonstrates for us that this is a real need, this population, in fact, does exist. The numbers of homeless veterans who presented bear that out. So our work on that front has only just begun, but I'm happy to say that the event was a success.

The volunteerism from the community at large, the veterans service organizations, veterans -- just the community, the Suffolk County residents who participated. We wound up with in total 165 volunteers, people who took that day, came out there and spent it doing anything and everything that we asked them to do from manning shower stations so that when the veterans were showering everything would be okay to setting up and breaking down tables and chairs, serving food, distributing clothing. The word no was never spoken. Everything that we asked of the volunteers they happily assisted us with.

We will be thanking them formally on Thursday, June 14th at 11 a.m. Any of the members that would like to join us we are going to have just like a coffee -- but we are inviting all of the volunteers and all of the participating organizations and agencies to the Media Room at the Dennison Building. Again, that's June 14th at 11 a.m and we'll formally thank them. My intention is to present everybody that participated with a certificate of thanks. So again, I would invite any of you who would like to attend and see the roomful of faces who really made this thing happen.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And Tom, what plans, if any, are there for a similar session in the future?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, we have been having some discussion with that. Nassau County holds one, if not two, per year depending on what's going on in Nassau County. We're working with Nassau so that we can stagger them and not have a Nassau and a Suffolk event too close to one another for a number of reasons. Probably the largest is that many of the agencies are federal, not many some, are Federal and State and to get them to participate in these types of events on a recurring basis -- I think if we give them a little bit of space in between I think it's more practical.

That being said, the event -- I tell people that we are a victim of our own success here. The County Executive, when he attended we had a conversation after the event, and he was impressed to the point where he instructed me to look into holding two of these per year versus one. So there's going to be some planning, we've already started the discussion in the office of what we're going to be doing. We just have to start putting dates together, and again, we'll be working with Nassau County so that we don't overlap one another. But we will be doing this again and again and again and again. It was a great event.

This coming -- not this Saturday but the following Saturday, May 19th at 11 a.m., we will be hosting the annual Armed Forces Day Ceremony at the Armed Forces Plaza at the Dennison Building. All of your offices were contacted. We have extended invitations to each of you. We look forward to seeing as many as will be able to attend. We're hoping for nice weather and it is always a very well attended event and we will have cakes and pastries and coffee and juice and so forth as refreshments after the event takes place. We've got a fly over schedule. I've got at least one aircraft scheduled to land in the parking lot at the Dennison Building that we'll leave on display all day for the residents and the children who want to get a look up close and personal. We've also got some military vehicles that will be set up and on display all day as well. We're trying to make it a more family friendly event than it has been in past years so that we encourage even greater numbers of people to come out and celebrate and thank the service of our veterans.

LEG. ALDEN:

Just a quick question on that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Yes, Legislator Alden.

LEG. ALDEN:

Tom, is that the Marine helicopter that you have got?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes. That's the same one that we had last year, the UH34D.

LEG. ALDEN:

Yeah, people love that. Kids love that.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Really for safety reasons we didn't publish the take off or landing times only because we prefer there be fewer people there than having people there as spectators when the thing is landing and taking off, but we're probably landing about 9 a.m. and she'll take off about four, if any of the members would like to be there for that.

And if I could just comment very briefly on the statement that the gentleman made earlier about the new -- the new problem that we are seeing in the diagnoses with the returning soldiers, and he is exactly right. Because of the survivor ability of the troops, the body armor, the armored vehicles, the ability of these soldiers to survive wounds that in previous wars would never have been thought to have been survivorable, these young people are losing limbs and they are experiencing tremendous trauma. The traumatic brain injury is becoming very, very prevalent. It's being seen more and more and there's actually a belief now that many cases of previously diagnosed PTSD may not in fact be PTSD at all but traumatic brain injury manifesting itself in such a way that it would appear to be a PTSD. But the courses of treatment for each of those are markedly different.

There's a real challenge before the VA right now and I think there -- at least at Northport we're stepping up to the plate. They have got a dedicated TBI unit over there where they are focusing on this and they're doing a great deal of research on how to best diagnose, treat and follow and continuing care for the TBI. I think we'll be hearing a lot more about the TBI in the future as the numbers of returning soldiers continues to increase. It's -- this is going to be a big one. We're going to see a lot of it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I recall that part of the conversation with the administration over at the VA, particularly when it comes to TBI treatment, and at least it was good to hear that it was something well recognized by the staff there. Of course, yeah, it is going to be a tremendous challenge for them as time goes on, but at least it was reassuring to hear from them that it was something that they seem to be well in tune with.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes. And again, it's better late than never. It was just something that we had never experienced on the scale that we are experiencing it now and they have wrapped their arms around it, so to speak, and hopefully some of this research will bear out the ability of the VA to do a better job in this particular area. It's a relatively new area of treatment and diagnosis.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Anything else for the Director? Presiding Officer.

P.O. LINDSAY:

The rest of the committee might know this, I might be behind the curve, but where are we with the east end extension of the clinic?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I had a conversation only yesterday with Joe Sledge from the Northport VA. He represents Jerry Culliton, who is the Director. The two facilities that were visited, I know the County Executive had sent a letter to Mr. Mitchell at the Peconic Bay Medical Center with some concerns. I don't know that that letter has been responded to yet. We are finalizing our response letter to the VA. They had provided to us a list of particulars, a bill of particulars if you will, of requirements that they have for whatever space they would ultimately occupy. And we, through our Department of Public Works, through the County Executive's Office, through Real Estate, were breaking that letter down, breaking that list of particulars down and finding out what we can comply with, what we can give them, what we can't give them and what we have to negotiate and meet somewhere in the middle on.

A lot of it comes down to things like square footage. In the most recent letter from the VA they added language requesting additional square footage for future expansion. We had never considered that. We had never been asked to look at that. So there were a couple of items that we are responding to them and telling them that we can't give them everything that they want. That letter should be -- today is Tuesday -- that letter should be in the mail to them by Thursday. And then obviously we would await their response to that letter.

At that point whatever location is ultimately decided upon, then we take the next step of going back out there with, again, with the VA engineers and architects, fire safety people, and our County equivalence of those folks. I would imagine the next would be developing specifications and drawings to accommodate whatever space is selected. And, Presiding Officer, if you like I'll have you cc'd on that letter.

P.O. LINDSAY:

Okay.

LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:

Can you cc me as well?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Sure --

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And perhaps the entire committee if you could.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

-- why don't I just send the whole committee.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Anybody else? Director Ronayne, thank you. It's always good to see.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you. Have a good day.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Just before we get to the agenda I'll call Doris Salzberg. Doris? Welcome, Ms. Salzberg. Thank you for being with us. You have three minutes.

MS. SALZBERG:

Well, actually I just wished to thank you for this remarkable opportunity. It's really very special when you reach out to elected officials for some help and they're as helpful as you have been. It doesn't always happen. And I would like to leave -- we are Reach Out America. We formed because we felt there were number of things that threatened our freedoms indeed, separation and other

things. We learned about the soldiers not receiving the benefits that was their due. We were so horrified and you were simply marvelous. We thank you.

We would like to leave our little brochure with you telling you about who we are. I guess I could leave it with Debbie. I assume, Debbie, that you have all the bills, the 635-200 about the separation that the soldiers are not receiving. Because if not, we do have that documented. And if you wish, we could leave it with Debbie as well. And I thank you. Is that my three minutes?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Plenty of time to spare, but thank you so much. Thanks for being with us today.

MS. SALZBERG:

Oh, my pleasure. Thanks for having us.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Moving to the agenda. Introductory resolutions.

Introductory Resolutions

IR 1332, Extend the deadline for the Senior Citizens Task Force. I'll make a motion to approve.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Vice Chairman Eddington. All in favor? Opposed? Abstention? Resolution passes.

(Vote: 4-0-0-1 Not Present - Legislator Cooper).

IR 1368, Directing Veterans Service Agency to establish a Suffolk County Veteran Resident Identification Card Program.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Motion to approve.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Motion to approve by Vice Chairman Eddington. Second by myself. On the motion.

LEG. ALDEN:

Explanation and also would it involve Tom's office? If it does maybe he could speak to it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Counsel.

MR. NOLAN:

Well, it does involve Veterans Service Agency. Actually we spoke with Mr. Ronayne while we were drafting this so I'll turn it over to Tom.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

To summarize, the Suffolk County Veterans Identification Card, very simply, there are a number of places that you'll go within the County that require you if you're seeking veterans benefits or veterans fee exemptions, park passes, things of that nature. Right now everybody requires that the level of proof be that you brought a copy of your discharge, bring your DD214, and everybody is going to administer their own version of verifying that you are a veteran and extending to you that benefit or that privilege.

By creating a Suffolk County Veterans ID card my office will be able to -- and also we possess the ability to verify in-depth and on a scale greater than any of the other offices in the County. Not everybody with a DD214 was honorably discharged. Not everybody who was discharged under Honorable conditions achieves veteran status. There are nuances within the discharges that we can verify and we can investigate that the other agencies really don't have the ability to do.

It would create the ability of the veteran coming to the Veteran Service Agency. We take a photograph, we print your card, after we verified your status obviously. And that card could then be accepted by any other County agency as proof of your veteran status. Suffolk County government has verified your veteran status already and issued you this card. Now you go to Parks, if you go to DSS, if you are using a bus and -- whatever the service is that you're seeking you'll have one card.

The additional benefit of providing this card is that for the veteran to receive the card he has got to come to the Veteran Service Agency. Now I've the veteran in an office with trained veteran service officers. We can expose that person to anything that he may or may be potentially entitled to or eligible for that he is not receiving or that he was not aware of. We would never compel anybody to avail themselves to any service. If they want to come up and take the card and don't want to talk to us about anything else that's fine. We'll verify you, issue the card, and you can be on your way.

It also allows down the road for expansion of additional services. One thought might be that -- transportation being a challenge in Suffolk County. One thought might be that perhaps someday we would offer veterans riding the bus routes into or out of the Northport VA facility to produce this card and let the card serve as bus pass so that the veteran seeking services at the VA doesn't have to go into his pocket.

LEG. ALDEN:

Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Alden.

LEG. ALDEN:

Can I just go one step further? Right now Parks Department you get a discount if you are a veteran.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes.

LEG. ALDEN:

On golf fees or whatever it is, camping fees and things like that. How does a veteran go about proving to a park attendant or to the Parks Department their veteran status?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

He's got to go to the Parks Office and produce a copy of his DD214.

LEG. ALDEN:

And a discharge.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

It's one and the same. If you were discharged prior to the period when they were issuing DD214s then your separation documents were your discharge papers, yes.

LEG. ALDEN:

Okay. Do you help those departments to interpret, you know, what they're looking at?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

When we are asked to. It's very infrequent that we are asked to. It is not even infrequent, it's rare.

LEG. ALDEN:

So that just opens up questions. You can't answer the questions because people over in Parks Department and other areas would have to answer the questions, like how they determine who gets a, you know, a discount or how they are identifying them. Do they issue a card, do you know, or you don't know.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I think they do, yes.

LEG. ALDEN:

This sounds like, you know, a good idea maybe that we could, you know, take the burden off of Parks and place it where it belongs.

MR. NOLAN:

If I could. I think that was part of the rationale for this resolution was there's a resolution pending that would give veterans a break on the Civil Service fees and with the Parks to link the veterans fees to senior citizens. It was thought this would be a good idea to make it easy for people to establish their status as a veteran.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And in fact that resolution is pending in the Parks Committee.

MR. NOLAN:

That's correct. They're basically waiting for this one to go through.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Right.

LEG. ALDEN:

Good.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And the other thing is, you know, there are veterans out there who do not have copies of their discharges or their DD214s. That person, were he to go to Parks, is going to have to apply for that document and wait for the government to mail it to him. Whatever time line that would be on, you know, that varies greatly. If you come in to me with your name, rank and serial number, I can verify you in the computer through the Veterans Administration that you served and the nature of your -- the character of your discharge, did you achieve veteran status as a result. I can do that without the burden of having to bring that paperwork into the office.

LEG. ALDEN:

Good. That sounds good.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thanks Tom. We have a motion and a second. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? Motion carries. **(Vote: 5-0-0-1 Not Present: Legislator Cooper) (Presiding Officer Lindsay voted with the committee)**

LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:

List me as a cosponsor.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Cosponsors all around.

Memorializing Resolutions

MR 22: Memorializing Resolution in support of establishing a mature worker business initiative.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I'll make the motion to approve.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Vice Chairman Eddington. All in favor? Opposed? Abstention? Motion carries. **(Vote: 4-0-0-1 Not Present: Legislator Cooper)**

LEG. ALDEN:

There is pending legislation, though, right?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

There is pending legislation in the Assembly and in the Senate.

LEG. ALDEN:

I don't want to be tricked and vote for for a Sense of the Legislature. All right.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

MR 27: Memorializing Resolution in support of New York State Legislation to cap real property school tax for persons seventy years of age or older (Assembly Bill A 1894 and Senate Bill S. 3533)

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Motion to approve.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Motion to approve by Vice Chairman Eddington.

LEG. ALDEN:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Legislator Alden. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? Motion carries. **(Vote: 4-0-0-1 Not Present: Legislator Cooper)**

MR 28: Memorializing Resolution requesting the United States Congress to enact the "Wounded Warrior Assistance Act of 2007". I'll make the motion to approve.

LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Legislator Schneiderman. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? Motion carries. **(Vote: 4-0-0-1 Not Present: Legislator Cooper)**

MR 29: Memorializing Resolution in support of New York State Legislation to provide seniors with a choice to cap their school tax rate or receive a STAR rebate.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

I'll make a motion.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Motion to approve by Vice Chairman Eddington.

LEG. ALDEN:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Legislator Alden. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? Motion carries. **(Vote: 4-0-0-1**

Not Present: Legislator Cooper)

Seeing nothing further on the agenda, motion to adjourn.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Vice Chairman Eddington. We are adjourned.

**(THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 1:43 PM
{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**