

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 July 31, 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
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/Human Services Div.
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Leader
Debra Alloncius, Legislative Rep for AME
Frank F. Belsito, Commander of the American Legion Pearl Harbor Memorial Post No. 1941
Joe Dujmic, County Executive's Office
Doris Brennan, America Legion Post No. 1941
Catherine Stark, Aide for Leg. Schneiderman
Linda Bay, Legislative Aide for minority party
Fran Siems, Legislative Aide
Mary Ann Malack-Ragona, Alzheimers Association
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken By:

Diana Kraus - Court Stenographer

(THE MEETING COMMENCED AT 1:12 PM)

CHAIRMAN STERN:

We'll get started. Committee on Veterans and Seniors will come to order. I'd ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Vice Chairman Eddington.

SALUTATION

I'd ask everybody to please remain standing and join us in a moment of silence to keep all of our very brave men and woman fighting for us and our freedoms overseas in your thoughts and prayers, and particularly to keep in our prayers Christopher Scherer, a serviceman who passed away all too early in Iraq.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. We'll begin today with the public portion. I would ask Frank Belsito to join us.

MR. BELSITO:

Good afternoon to all present that are here this afternoon at this meeting. My name is Frank Belsito, Commander of the American Legion Pearl Harbor Memorial Post No. 1941 of Port Jefferson, New York. This post was chartered in 1983.

I thank Legislator Steven Stern, the Chair of this Veterans Committee, for giving us the opportunity to speak to you, the committee members. We are here today to inform this committee of a project that the American Legion Post 1941 would like to complete at Calverton National Cemetery that is located here in Suffolk County.

I'd like to give you some past history of Post 1941. In 1987 I received some complaints concerning the placing of U.S. grave site flags on the graves of our deceased veterans that are buried in Long Island National Cemetery in Farmingdale. The complaints were not of the flags being placed on the graves for Memorial Day, but were of the question why aren't the graves at Calverton National Cemetery also having flags on their graves for Memorial Day. It took eight years of meetings with the VA to give us permission to place the U.S. flags on the graves. The VA stated after one week we had to also pick up the flags.

We are proud to say that in 1995 we placed and picked up flags on 110,000 graves with the help of 1,500 Suffolk County Boy Scouts. Twelve years later, 2007, we are still placing and picking up the flags of now 190,000 graves with the help of 3,000 Boy Scouts, 2,500 Girl Scouts, and 500 adult volunteers for a total of 6,000 Suffolk County volunteers who are proud to come to Calverton to place the flags, rain or shine, to honor and remember for Memorial Day the deceased veterans who served honorably in the U.S. Military.

In the Abe Lincoln National Cemetery in Chicago, Illinois, there is a Memorial Walk that is very breathtaking to see. We have some pictures that we would like this committee to see. The pictures were shown to the Director at Calverton National Cemetery and we now have a location of three acres at Calverton for a Memorial Walk. We have the students of the Drafting Department at BOCES who went to the location in Calverton National Cemetery and mapped out the area, as you will see in the diorama. The students are thrilled to be part of this project. The students in the Carpentry Department will be building benches, signs, a scatter garden, and a bridge to enter the area for the Memorial Walk.

I am showing you that we have young people who are residents of Suffolk County involved in our projects at Calverton National Cemetery.

We had met with Suffolk County Legislator Ed Romaine, whose district that Calverton National Cemetery is in, and informed him of the project. Legislator Romaine stated that he would prepare legislation for the 2008 Suffolk County Budget for this project. This committee's support will be helpful for this project and bring it to a reality for all of the residents of Suffolk County who feel that this Suffolk County Legislature remembers the men and woman who have served honorably in the U.S. Military.

We plan to meet with Legislator Vivian Fisher, who is the Suffolk County Legislator in the district of the American Legion Post 1941, and look forward to a meeting with Suffolk County Executive Steve Levy for his support of the project.

Chairman Stern and committee members, I thank you all for the time allowed to inform you of this important project that will help family members of deceased veterans buried in Calverton National Cemetery have a place to sit and reflect while visiting their loved ones.

In closing, this Memorial Walk will be a place for schools to come and learn more about the men and woman who have served and are serving today to help keep our nation free.

I have Doris Brennan with me, who is a Memorial Committee member. Maybe she'd like to add something to my comments if we still have time.

MS. BRENNAN:

First of all, I just to let you know that the project out at Calverton National Cemetery as far as the flags go, that's being used as a role model throughout the country. We want to continue with that and have Calverton National Cemetery to continue to be a role model. They are very excited out there about us having veterans not just buried and in some cases families pass on and there's nobody to remember them. We want the young people to remember them. We want to have a reason for people to go out there.

Prior to 14 years ago I would never have thought of going out to a cemetery just to go out to a cemetery. I have to say my involvement with Calverton, the place is just so beautiful, so well run, and they are so community minded that I'm excited about being involved in this project, too. And we really do ask for your support so that we can continue to educate our youth and also to have a place for families to remember.

MR. BELSITO:

I know that most of you saw the diorama, but it's not a cabbage patch, it's not broccoli and it's not a roadway for cars or for trains. But this is a project that the students at BOCES, I guess they went out there, surveyed the area, the three point something acres of land, and formed this diorama that we'd like you to see. You also have a copy in your folder that I gave you. But the important thing is that these students are involved. And we'd like this committee to get involved also with support. If you have any questions at this time I would like to answer them.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Alden.

LEG. ALDEN:

Commander, do you have an approximation of what the budget would be to do that park?

MR. BELSITO:

Yeah, \$47,000.

LEG. ALDEN:

Okay. And your plan or Legislator Romaine's plan to include in our budget approximately how much of that?

MR. BELSITO:

I think the 47,000.

LEG. ALDEN:

Okay.

MR. BELSITO:

That was my understanding. We plan also to touch base with all the Legislators in the County so this way everybody will be informed and probably I'll have to come back and make a presentation to the full Legislature, which I'd be glad to do. Any other questions?

MS. BRENNAN:

May I just say something? For a project of that extent the reason the budget is so small is because so much of it is being donated, done at cost, in some cases just material is being provided, so obviously it's a massive project. And also the monuments that would go into this project will be provided by each individual veterans organization. So that's the reason that it's not really an overpowering amount of money. We've already done a lot of groundwork.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Eddington.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Yes. Have you reached out to the other American Legion Posts?

MR. BELSITO:

Right now we are on the threshold of creating this to happen. Once everything in place all organizations throughout the County will be informed. One organization in particular, Dan Murphy, who is the National JA for the Purple Heart, Military Order of the Purple Heart, he heard about this and he wants to be part of this committee and get the Purple Heart to have a nice monument right there at the entrance like at the Abraham Lincoln Cemetery in Chicago. They have a big monument from the Pearl Harbor survivors. He would like to do the same and get the Military Order of the Purple Heart and I think that is so apropos. I think a lot of you might know Dan Murphy, that his son was killed in Afghanistan and is up now for the Congressional Medal of Honor.

So, some people are coming forth but everybody will be informed. But I think that if we start touching base with the groups and they are going to say well, where is it. I mean, we haven't got anything in place yet for them to do. We do have monuments at Calverton that will be moved over into this walkway.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

I ask you because I'm with the American Legion in Medford, 1848. And I know, you know, we go out there so I know that if you contacted our Commander he would be very much supportive and want to be involved.

MR. BELSITO:

I compliment you for being involved with that Medford Post because I know for years it was Mary {Flawcheck} who was the Commander and Mary was a dedicated veteran and dedicated legionaire. I'm glad that post is reactivated. We thank you. You have my card and I'd be glad to help out in any way there.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Great.

MR. BELSITO:

Can we just show you some quick pictures if possible?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

We can take a look at some pictures, pretty quick.

MS. BRENNAN:

It's very short.

MR. BELSITO:

It's very short. This is in Illinois, Chicago, Illinois. This is where when we were visiting there we passed by the cemetery and we saw this. We just said this belongs in New York also.

The important thing is that this is really going to be an educational facility out there. Right now, like I say, we have 6,000 volunteers, mostly young people, that come out to Calverton. They'll be very aware of this.

MS. BRENNAN:

Excuse me. What you're looking at now is Calverton, the section, the three acres in Calverton that has been set aside for this project.

MR. BELSITO:

Next time we come we will bring a big projection screen.

MS. BRENNAN:

Right across from it, on this side here, there is parking for 1,500 cars, so there is not even a parking situation that has to be created because there is parking for 1,500 cars. And that's it.

LEG. ALDEN:

Through the Chairman.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Alden.

LEG. ALDEN:

There won't be any burials in that area? It would just be set aside as a memorial park.

MR. BELSITO:

Exactly. Actually, this location at the cemetery is so perfect because when you come in the main entrance it will be one of the first visible spots that you will see. And it was never set up for burials.

And talking about that if I may, Calverton is destined to have 500,000 graves out there, but now they have come up with a new procedure that we're even going to have more so we might be having 700,000. We have a lot of veterans here in Suffolk County and throughout Long Island, so. I appreciate your time, and if there is no other questions --

LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:

I'm sorry if you said it before. You have all the permission you need from the Federal government?

MR. BELSITO:

Yes, yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you.

MR. BELSITO:

Mr. Chairman, we thank you very much and look forward to maybe this committee writing up a letter of support and then we can move on. Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

You're welcome. Tom. Welcome to Director Ronayne.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good afternoon, Chairman, members. Thank you again for having me. I think I'll be fairly brief today. There was just a couple of things that I wanted to touch on.

In your opening, Mr. Chairman, you had mentioned Marine Corporal Christopher Scherer from East Northport who was killed last Saturday. He was shot by a sniper in Iraq. Chris was killed 20 days after his 20th birthday.

Suffolk County, as we have for some time now, really makes a concerted effort to go to the aid of the families in their time of need when we experience these losses. And I have to take -- I have to take a moment and make special note of Commissioner Dormer. The resources and the assets that the Police Department made available, not only to serve the family and to ensure their privacy and their safety, but also going to pick so up the body, escort the body back home. On Saturday the Marine Corp was unable to provide a flyover at the cemetery and the Suffolk County Police Department activated three helicopters and we provided a flyover at the cemetery which was extremely moving to the family. I can't express to you enough how grateful the family was for the efforts on the part of Suffolk County to remember our son. I just wanted the Legislature to be aware of that.

I had passed around a copy, simply a copy of an e-mail that I have received, one of several, for an organization known as Honor Flight. I think I may have reported on this organization once before. They're very new to this area. In fact, they have not yet performed any of their operations. There is one coming up in October and really the gist of what this organization does is they take World War II veterans at absolutely no cost, they provide transportation from the veteran's home to the airport that they are using on that particular event. They fly the veteran to Washington, D.C. They provide all of the ground transportation for the day to be spent in Washington. They provide the meals and you have volunteers and what they refer to as guardians, who escort and chaperone these individuals. They always have medical personal. They have at least one doctor and several paramedics that travel on these junkets.

What they do is they start the day off visiting the various war memorials in Washington. They stop for lunch about mid-day and then the second half of the day these World War II veterans are taken to the World War II monument where they are able to spend a number of hours. If there are mobility problems they do provide the wheelchairs and whatever is necessary for these less ambulatory veterans to get around.

They are trying to work their way into this area. The real reason for my reporting on this and offering you the information in this e-mail is they haven't asked for a nickel, they are not asking for support in that form. But if we could help get the word out to your constituents, the World War II veterans and your constituents. And you can see that on their first trip they intend to fly 57 veterans. That's a pretty noble undertaking. So you have 57 veterans, at least -- I believe the ratio is one escort per veteran, at most two veterans per escort. So you are talking about a substantial number of people becoming involved in this. And I know that, as we all know, the opportunity to do things for our World War II veterans is running out. So, if we could carry this word back to our communities I'm sure we have veterans in all of our communities who would be interested in taking advantage of this opportunity.

That being said, I just wanted to report on the progress. Back in June legislation was signed that we -- my office was tasked with creating the Suffolk County Veterans identification card. We have met with some vendors. We have a vendor right now that we're in negotiation with. We have a proposal. He is on the State contract and we're trying to figure out the funding on this. But we do have a sample of the card. The card has been created. So we're going forward with this. We hope

to be able to meet the mandate for the date of implementation. And again, right now the moment we figure out how to fund this we'll be taking photographs. So if anybody is interested in seeing the card I'll pass it around. It's a sample so I don't necessarily need it back. And that's really all I have to report on.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Anybody? Tom, thanks. Good to see you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

I don't have a lot to report, either. We had the picnic last week. It was very successful. The best weather we've had in ten years, which I have nothing to do with but it was nice to have. We had probably about 1,400 seniors there. It was a pretty mellow day. Everything worked out fine.

The other thing, I know even though it is supposed to be 80, 90 degrees this week, I just wanted to let you that the HEAP applications are being mailed out from the State at the end of August. So that will be occurring the next few weeks. Once those applications go out to those who were approved last year our office will start processing those for over age 60 because we are a sub to DSS for those HEAP applications. Once we process they go to the HEAP central over at DSS. Checks do not get cut until some time in November, but they are going to start the mail out process from the State. So you may be getting some questions or wondering why they are coming out, but the State is in charge of all that. So they will be mailing them out some time after August 20th, so you may start getting phone calls. So even though it's 80 and 90 degrees out, we will be hearing from people on HEAP. Just so you are not surprised by that.

Last year I think we did 5,400 applications in our office. My understanding of the State's plan for HEAP is that the guidelines have increased a little bit so more people might be able to take advantage of the HEAP program, which would be nice if that was possible because last year they tightened it up and we had less people who were eligible. So hopefully we'll have more people taking advantage of it. Any questions?

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

Thanks.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly, thanks. Mary Ann? It really is a great pleasure to welcome Mary Ann Ragona to our committee today. Mary Ann is the Executive Director and CEO of the Long Island Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association. Mary Ann, welcome.

MS. RAGONA:

Thank you. I always hate reading prepared presentations, but for this it's such an important two pieces of legislation that I actually decided to put this in writing because it is important for me for the families here on Long Island to touch upon the key points and why these Memorializing Resolutions are so very, very important to Long Island, in particular in Suffolk County.

It is my privilege to be here this afternoon to support resolutions that will help to memorialize Federal legislation bringing much needed assistance to Long Island families who are coping with the challenges of Alzheimer's Disease.

The Long Island Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association represents more than 55,000 families here on Long Island and more than 100,000 caregivers, providing support and resources to help minimize

caregiver stress. Seventy percent of those diagnosed with Alzheimer's Disease are, in fact, cared for in the home, and it is the goal of our Chapter to keep loved ones in their home for as long as possible. By achieving this goal it is our hope that we will be able to minimize premature placement into nursing home facilities, which in turn will help to reduce the cost of Medicaid to our Counties.

The Alzheimer's Breakthrough Act is one of the Association's top legislative priorities, as this legislative initiative recommends that government double the funding for Alzheimer's research at the National Institute of Health. This bill also instructs the NIH to conduct additional research on the prevalence and causes of early onset Alzheimer's Disease, Alzheimer's Disease that afflicts those people under the age of 65.

The bill also calls for a national summit on Alzheimer's to look at promising research breakthroughs, and the bill also affirms in law a number of programs that are important to the Association as well as to our Long Island families, which include our 24 hour Contact Center, the CDC Brain Health Initiative, and the Alzheimer's Matching Grants to states.

The Alzheimer's Breakthrough Act is a tremendous step forward in the fight against Alzheimer's Disease. Nationwide there are more than five million people living with Alzheimer's Disease and the number is expected to soar to as many as 16 million by mid-century. The Association has also recently identified more than 500,000 individuals nationwide who have a diagnosis of early onset Alzheimer's Disease. Again, those under the age of 65. Here on Long Island we are seeing an increase in the number of people under the age of 65 who have now been diagnosed with the disease. At present we have just over 60 early onset cases in the Chapter, and that is up from 22 cases last year.

And just aside from this written testimony, the Association is beginning to take a very close look at early stage Alzheimer's Disease as well as early onset Alzheimer's Disease. The research that we have been able to accomplish to date has provided us now with some really good information as to what we believe is causing Alzheimer's Disease. And because we have that information we have been working with the pharmaceutical companies to develop drugs that will, in fact, help keep people in the earlier stages of Alzheimer's Disease. And for that -- for us that means that we have to take a look at the new dynamics of the disease and begin to start planning on how we're going to provide programs and services for people that are going to be kept in the early stages of Alzheimer's Disease for much longer periods of time.

This important legislation passed by the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, offers promise for someday having a world without Alzheimer's Disease. By calling for a doubling of the funding for Alzheimer's research at the National Institutes of Health, this bold legislation authorizes the necessary resources to restore momentum in the pursuit of better diagnoses as well as prevention and treatment of this devastating disease.

I can tell you that when I first came to the Chapter four and a half years ago and went to my first public policy forum in Washington, D.C. with the National Association, our goal was to raise a billion dollars for research. That year we were fighting to have \$60 million set aside for research. That number over the past four and a half years continues to be cut, probably at the worst time possible as we're getting ready to make some breakthroughs. I just got an alert this past week saying that the Federal budget is looking to cut research funding again to the NIH when it pertains to Alzheimer's Disease and I think this year they are looking at about \$16 million. So we just keep getting less and less and that's certainly not going to help the situation.

New treatments that alter the course of disease could save millions of baby boomers from the disease and yield \$61 billion in annual Medicare and Medicaid savings within five years of a breakthrough. The Alzheimer's Breakthrough Act is the necessary impetus to create this important outcome.

This legislation will also provide much needed support for the nearly ten million caregivers right now.

Many of these caregivers are part of what we call the sandwich generation, those sandwiched between caring for their aging parents and caring for their children -- individuals who find the dual caregiver role financially and emotionally draining. The Alzheimer's Breakthrough Act seeks to provide families with vital resources and tools to assist them in this demanding role.

The second resolution addresses the Family Assistance Act which creates up to \$3,000 in tax credits for family caregivers to help families caring for loved ones with chronic conditions. These tax credits would help to pay for things like prescription drugs, home health care, adult day-care and respite care. These just happen to be some of the most requested services at our Chapter. This bill also makes long-term care insurance premiums deductible for all taxpayers and improves consumer protections for long-term care insurance.

This bill would assist families caring for a loved one with serious chronic conditions, conditions such as multiple chronic conditions or severe cognitive impairment and the inability to perform activities of daily living without substantial assistance. And I can tell you that at our Chapter most of the calls that we get are usually crisis calls, they are calls where the families are at their wits end. Either financially they have exhausted all of their resources but still would like to care for their loved one in their home and are trying to figure out how they are going to be able to do that. And these two bills are actually bills that have been strongly supported by the Association for a number of years now in an effort to address some of these issues that we're facing at each one of our Chapters on a local level.

Alzheimer's Disease poses tremendous human, social and economic burdens on the nation as a whole and is a challenge to us all. The Alzheimer's Association applauds Legislator Stern and the members of the Veterans and Senior Committee for recognizing the importance of these two Federal initiatives. Alzheimer's Association Long Island stands ready, willing and able to support this committee and the Legislature in any way that it can.

I thank you for giving me the opportunity to be here this afternoon. More importantly, the Long Island families we serve are most grateful for your continued support. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you so much for being with us today. And it's actually great to see when you say spoke about so much of the progress that's being made in areas of research and great to see that great strides are being made, of course, across the country, all over the world, but also right here in our Cold Spring Laboratories are on the verge of some major breakthroughs to assist those that suffer from Alzheimer's and their families.

MS. RAGONA:

And I can tell you that it is the Association that is supporting some of that private research through our research fund, so.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Thanks so much for being with us today.

MS. RAGONA:

Thank you.

LEG. ALDEN:

This actually could be a historic moment. These could be the last two memorializing resolutions this Legislative body passes. Good thing that Cooper, Legislator Barraga and D'Amaro aren't here today.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

We will hopefully send these very important messages to our Federal government. So we'll take on those memorializing resolutions. ***MR.54, Memorializing Resolution requesting United States Congress to enact the Alzheimer's Breakthrough Act of 2006. (Stern).*** I'll make a motion to

approve. Second by Legislator Alden.

LEG. ALDEN:
Seven.

LEG. EDDINGTON:
The first one says six.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
It does say six.

LEG. ALDEN:
I have seven. I have a revised copy.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
You have the much better copy. 2007. Are you going to second? Second by Legislator Alden. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? **(Vote: 4-0-0-1 Not Present: Legislator Cooper)**.

MR.55, Memorializing Resolution requesting United States Congress to enact the Alzheimer's Family Assistance Act of 2007. (Stern). I make a motion to approve.

LEG. EDDINGTON:
Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Second by Vice Chairman Eddington. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? Motion carries. **(Vote: 4-0-0-1 Not Present: Legislator Cooper)**.

Anything else? Anybody else? We are adjourned.

**(THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 1:44 PM)
{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**