

**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 January 26, 2009.

**Members Present:**

Leg. Steven H. Stern, Chairman  
Leg. Jack Eddington, Vice-Chair  
Leg. Kate Browning  
Leg. Ricardo Montano  
Leg. Jay Schneiderman

**Also in Attendance:**

George Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature  
Renee Ortiz, Chief Deputy Clerk  
Deborah Harris, Aide to Legislator Stern  
Lance Reinheimer, Budget Review Office  
Craig Freas, Budget Review Office  
Benny Pernice, Budget Review Office  
Jack Caffey, Presiding Officer's Office  
Michael Pitcher, Presiding Officer's Office  
Bob Martinez, Aide to Legislator Montano  
Catherine Stark, Aide to Legislator Schneiderman  
Brendan Chamberlain, County Executive's Office  
Debra Alloncius, Legislative Director AME  
Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency/Human Services Div.  
Lieutenant Lou Delli-Pizzi, First Battalion 69th Infantry/Fighting 69th  
Gail D'Ambrosio, SCPOA President  
All Other Interested Parties

**Minutes Taken By:**

Lucia Braaten - Court Stenographer

***[THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:44 A.M.]***

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Good morning, everybody. Welcome to the Committee on Veterans and Seniors. I'd like to welcome everybody, and we'll start off by -- with the Pledge of Allegiance. We are privileged today to have leading us in the Pledge of Allegiance Lieutenant Lou Delli-Pizzi, who has returned to us, and with the Fighting 69th, from Afghanistan. So it really is a privilege for all of us to recite the Pledge of Allegiance this morning led by Lieutenant Delli-Pizzi.

***(\*Salutation\*)***

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

***(\*Moment of Silence\*)***

As we remain standing, we also take a special moment to remember Jonathan Keller, who, at 30 years old, was serving our nation as a Specialist in the Army National Guard as a part of the Fighting 69th, who we unfortunately just found out a short time ago passed away. So we keep him and his family in our thoughts and prayers as well.

***(\*Moment of Silence\*)***

Thank you. Thank you, everybody, for being here. We have a couple of presentations today, and we have a short Legislative agenda. But I would like to call up first to join us First Lieutenant Lou Delli-Pizzi of the Fighting 69th.

As I said just a moment of ago, it truly is a privilege for all of us to have Lou join us this morning. Lou's kind enough to take time out of his day to share with us some important information about how he's doing. It's always good to see Beth here and his family, but, most importantly, although, we welcome Lou and the Fighting 69th back, which -- with a much deserved thank you.

We also know that it's very important for all of us here in Suffolk County, and really every level of government, to ensure that our returning veterans and their families have the important information and access to critical services that they need to ensure a smooth transition back to their homes and to their communities. And so with that, Lieutenant Delli-Pizzi, it is a great pleasure to have you with us today.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Thank you very much, and good morning. Chairman Stern, Members of the County Legislature and guests, thank you for the invitation and the opportunity to speak to Suffolk County Government Officials today. As you know by that very kind introduction, my name is Lou Delli-Pizzi and I'm an officer in the First Battalion 69th Infantry here in New York and I'm stationed on Long Island. I'm also a Suffolk County resident for over ten years, and I live in West Islip with my wife, Beth, and two children. My wife, Beth, is seated behind me. She's also the President of the Long Island Family Readiness Group of the 69th.

I'd like to talk to you today about soldiers of the 69th, which is also known as the Famous Fighting 69th. The 69th is a famous Army Infantry Unit and has two companies in Suffolk County and approximately 300 soldiers on Long Island. The Battalion's footprint extends all the way up to Green County in Upstate New York, with a total of over 800 soldiers. Almost all of these soldiers are combat veterans.

A little brief history and background on the 69th. The famed unit has been portrayed in the epic movie "The Fighting 69th" with James Cagney, and more recently in a bestselling novel by Sean Flynn, "The Fighting 69th, One Remarkable Unit." The Fighting 69th has fought in more wars and

campaigns than any other unit in the military. It is the first military unit to respond to the attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11. The unit was then deployed to West Point to protect our future military leaders, then went on to Iraq where 19 members were killed in action, numerous more wounded in battle. As you now know, the unit recently returned from Afghanistan and is now the only unit to have served at all three fronts in the war on terrorism, the World Trade Center, Iraq and Afghanistan.

General Douglas MacArthur said, "No greater fighting regiment has ever existed than the Famous Fighting 69th of New York." I submit to you that I agree with that. The name "The Fighting 69th" was bestowed on the regiment by General Robert E. Lee. He once asked what troops were facing his forces. When he was told the 69th New York, his reply was, "Ah, that fighting 69th," and today the name has stuck. Through the years, seven of its members have received the Medal of Honor.

One thing I'm here to report to you today is that the 69th soldiers of today, like so many of their predecessors, not only answered the call, but they lived up to the honor and esteem of their famous regiment. In their most recent combat mission, almost all of them were in direct personal combat and contact with enemy forces in Afghanistan. During the mission, they were spread out over much of the country as security forces protecting bases and convoys or as embedded combat advisors. Many of them performed traditional special forces missions as embedded trainers and combat advisors for Afghan indigenous forces.

The embedded soldiers of the 69th mentored, and trained, and fought alongside Afghan forces in some of the most austere and violent places on earth during one of the most deadly time periods in Afghanistan. A number of these embedded teams accomplished their missions and trained and mentored Afghan forces to the point where they can fight the insurgency in their own country with little or no coalition support. Mission success there. And I believe, it's public knowledge and I know it's no secret, that training and mentoring the Afghan forces is the main effort, and it's our exit strategy in the war on terrorism. I'm here to tell you another thing. I don't have the final tally yet, but a number of these individuals were awarded the Bronze Star, Army Commendation Medals, Army Achievement Medals, and the prestigious and elite Combat Infantry Badge, which is awarded only to infantry troops who are directly and personally engaged in close personal combat. Unfortunately, the unit soldiers also received a number of Purple Hearts.

Amongst the soldiers wounded in action receiving the Purple Heart are two soldiers seriously wounded in action, one of them the Chairman spoke about earlier, Jonathan Keller, Suffolk County, resident of Wading River. He was seriously wounded in the gunfight with Taliban fighters near the Pakistan Border close to a place called Jalalabad. As you now know, unfortunately, even though Jonathan and his 69th buddies defeated the enemies of freedom in the engagement that day, Jonathan lost his toughest battle, the battle to recover, and he passed away Saturday night after enduring nine grueling surgeries down in Fort Bragg in a hospital.

Another brave soldier, Staff Sergeant Downing from Massachusetts who volunteered to serve with the famous Fighting 69th. He lost both his legs in an IED blast near Kabul. Right now, he's down at Walter Reed. He's resilient, he's still fighting. This soldier is full of vigor and the right stuff, he won't be defeated. I'm told that through advancements in medical and latest science advancements in prosthetics, he started to walk again. He's an inspiration to us all. And Staff Sergeant Downing, he's going to be leading the Saint Patrick's Day Parade in New York City, which, by the way, the 69th has led for more than 200 years.

Unfortunately, not all of the soldiers came home. Amongst those killed in action was Specialist Anthony Mangano of Greenlawn, another Suffolk County resident. Anthony was killed in an ambush in Kandahar back in May. He leaves behind a wife, a mother and brother from Suffolk County. His brother wears the uniform for us every day. He's a New York State Trooper assigned right over here in Brentwood.

Last Thursday, the County Executive, along with Chairman Stern, presented Anthony's family the

Distinguished Military Service Medal. This was during a Suffolk County ceremony recognizing Gold Star Family members and Veterans, a small but extremely meaningful gesture to honor veterans.

A unique thing about the 69th soldiers and the famed regiment is that they're part of the New York Army National Guard. You see, every soldier is a citizen soldier, a guardsman. So much more than one weekend a month, they serve the military, they serve us, yet they live and work in our community. You don't always recognize them, they don't always wear this green uniform, but you see them, in or out of uniform, they're there. They might have children that go to your children's school, they may live on your block, they may even work with you. You may see them in line at the movies, at restaurants, they shop in our stores, they go to our beaches and our parks. They come from all walks of life and are an accurate reflection of our diverse community. You see, the Fighting 69th is your unit, it's your soldiers, they are a reflection of you, they are you, they are Suffolk County. And they go and fight for freedom in the war against evil. They fight for us, for our community and for other great communities like ours. These soldiers and their families, they serve and they continue to serve, all the while being far away from the support network of an active duty base. When reserve and guard soldiers go down range, it's much more difficult for the families. It's more difficult because the soldiers and families are geographically removed from the support networks that exist in and around active duty bases. That's why units like the famous Fighting 69th rely so heavily on communities to support their soldiers and families. And I will tell you, firsthand personal knowledge, Suffolk County can be proud of what they have done for their soldiers, their unit, their Fighting 69th.

A year ago, the County pulled out all the stops and threw the 69th the largest going away ceremony in the history of the State, and throughout the year, the County Executive, Chairman Stern, Director of Veteran Affairs Tom Ronayne, and their staffs were in constant contact with our families, supporting our families, making things happen, doing the right thing.

I'll tell you, as a military leader, I know one of the best ways for soldiers to concentrate on their mission down range is to ensure that the mission on the home front is being taken care of. Suffolk County is definitely to be commended. You have set the standard for other communities to follow in the field of soldier and family support, but our work is not done. Our soldiers need jobs, our soldiers need housing, and they'll need health care, and Social Services, and follow-up, and education, and referrals. We need to do our part for your soldiers and your unit, because they served for us and stood in the face of evil, and because we need to keep them and the next generation ready for the next mission that hopefully never comes.

And one more thing, Ladies and Gentlemen. About a year ago, the County Executive gave me a Suffolk County flag as a gesture and a symbol of a great and free community. I'm here to tell you another thing firsthand. Soldiers of this famous regiment, the Fighting 69th, brought that Suffolk County flag with them to Afghanistan, and they flew that Suffolk County flag in the face of the enemy, in the direct face of evil. They flew it, not as a symbol of occupation and control, but as a defiant symbol of freedom and liberty, and a symbol of a community and good. And, Ladies and Gentlemen, I'm looking forward to returning that flag to the County. I'm looking forward to returning it as a symbol of great efforts and determination by our soldiers, by our unit, and by all service members. I see it as a symbol of partnership between soldiers and their community, but, most of all, a symbol. As long as places in our great country like Suffolk County exist and continue to do the right thing, freedom and liberty will prevail.  
Thank you, Ladies and Gentlemen.

***(Applause)***

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Lou, thank you. Thank you for your service, your commitment, not to -- just to yourself and to your family, but for all the members of the Fighting 69th. All of us, all 1.5 million residents of Suffolk County owe you and certainly owe Beth a tremendous thank you for all that you've done and, of course, will continue to do.

I think that's what's so important about today is to recognize, along with you, Lou, that when our veterans return home, that the job is not done, that we all still have a lot of work to do to ensure that when they come home, that they have a smooth transition back to their families and their communities as is possible. And we want to know what we can do to help.

As you know, we have veterans, parents, and spouses of veterans here serving within Suffolk County government and every single one of us wants to, you know, ensure that our commitment continues and that we can do whatever we can do to help.

So with that, there are actually several questions and issues that I would like to discuss. But, first, let me turn it over to Vice-Chairman Eddington.

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

Thank you. And welcome home.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Thank you.

**LEG. BROWNING:**

I've always had a strong connection with your unit, at least in my mind. The first book I can remember my mother reading to me as a child was Father Duffy. And I have family that fought in every war, including the Spanish American War with Teddy Roosevelt, and I always fantasize that I had a relative in the Civil War in the Fighting 69th. And I've always, ever since my mother talked to me about that whole unit and everything, she was always proud of it as an Irish-American, she said that you should live your life by their motto, which is, "Those who never flee from the threat of spears." And I've always thought that that's really how to run your life. And what you said today shows that the motto is still strong and upheld. And I'm proud to be an American, a Suffolk County resident and an Irish-American. And will tell you, the next time you go to the Brewery in Blue Point, the beer's on me.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Well, thank you for both, and thank you for the beer. I like the blueberry beer that they have there, by the way.

**LEG. EDDINGTON:**

You got it.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

But on behalf of the soldiers of the 69th, I want to thank all of you. And I certainly will convey what you have told me today. It's a great unit there. They're made up of great Americans and they're from all walks of life here in Suffolk County. It really is a true microcosm and real melting pot of what our community is. And these are great young men that are doing good things for us. And they have so many skills and they bring so much more to the military because they're from the community, because they're policemen, and firemen, and lawyers, and financial people, and carpenters. And they're able to go down range and perform missions that are more complex and more difficult than traditional full-time Army units, in that -- and that is because they come from places like Suffolk County, because of all the support that they get from this community.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Schneiderman.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

Lieutenant, thank you for coming here today, telling us more about the Fighting 69th. There's two main things I want to say to you, is one is thank you for your service, and two is welcome home.

I also want to say your wife has been -- Beth, I believe it is, has been coordinating an effort to get supplies out from the local communities. And in my office in Sag Harbor there are 54 boxes, care packages that are going to be sent over to Afghanistan, and it's quite impressive. They were raised, I guess, through Girl Scouts in the Westhampton area, and they're stacked so high, it practically reaches the ceiling in my office. So she's really been doing a wonderful job, and whatever we can do to help and support you -- I just want you to know how proud I am personally, and we as a community are, of your efforts to protect us and to fight for our nation. Thank you.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Well, thank you, sir. I'll make sure we get a truck out there so you can clear out your office.

**LEG. SCHNEIDERMAN:**

Thank you.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Browning.

**LEG. BROWNING:**

Again, welcome home. And I'm sorry to hear my friend's not back yet, but I know he'll be home soon.

You know, 28 years I've been a military wife. My husband was at the 142nd Aviation. And you touched on something that I think is very important, because we had ten years active duty with the military. We lived on a -- we were stationed in Fort Carson and Fort Rucker, Alabama. Facilities are there, everything you possibly need, the hospital, all your facilities. And I think it's important to make sure, because we have so many service members here on Long Island, that we don't have -- you know, we don't have a military base with all of the necessities for the soldiers.

One of the things you touched on about having firemen, police officers, I've talked to Tom about this, you know, because my husband has, you know, recently retired, but he does a military support group in the City with police officers on the job. Have you -- do you have an inventory of how many -- you know, say the civilian jobs that your members -- how many full-timers? Obviously, you know that, but how many police officers, firemen, and what kind of services does the 69th offer to them? Because one of the things my husband noticed was, you know, he's a New York City police officer, when he was deployed, came back, there really wasn't a whole lot for them, as far as, you know, you have a soldier coming back to get back on the job and you're going to give him a gun to go back out on the street and it's quite a transition. Do you have anything within the 69th, or, you know -- and I know I've talked to Tom and I said --

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Sure.

**LEG. BROWNING:**

-- "I think it's so important that we do something for our military service members" --

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Sure, sure.

**LEG. BROWNING:**

-- especially when they're coming back into police work.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Sure. Well, that's kind of a complex question, but there -- we do have a number of exit interviews

and debriefings, and there's also a number of community-based counseling organizations, as well as official Army ones that are available to all soldiers returning. And, also, you're asking me a specific question about the New York City Police Department. They also have tremendous mental health availability for soldiers and all their officers. So they're also a big agency, which --

**LEG. BROWNING:**

Yeah.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

-- which is kind of on the forefront of taking care of their people, too, so they're kind of doing the right thing there, too.

You're asking me about jobs and things of that nature. We're trying to set up a job bank and a database for returning soldiers who don't have a job. Obviously, those that are policemen and firemen are very lucky to be employed --

**LEG. BROWNING:**

Yeah.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

-- by County, and State, and local governments, so they have protections under the law. And there's different protections that exist for folks that are returning to jobs that they have. One of my concerns is folks that don't have a job to return to, and I would like to try to keep them gainfully employed, keep them in our community, because it's not only in their best interest, it's not only something that they deserve, it's in our best interest, because it then becomes a retention tool for me in the military, that I can keep these experienced well-trained guys ready, not only to train new soldiers, but, hopefully -- well, for that mission that, hopefully, doesn't come, that they'll be ready again.

**LEG. BROWNING:**

And, you know, you're so right, because I know everybody's under the impression that a soldier's job is guaranteed when he comes back. And, you know, when my husband was deployed, there was a number of them. A couple of them were business owners.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Yeah.

**LEG. BROWNING:**

Their businesses were gone pretty much because of deployment. And, also, a couple of our airline pilots got pink slips.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Yeah.

**LEG. BROWNING:**

And I think, today's economy, you're going to see a lot more of that.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Sure, sure.

**LEG. BROWNING:**

So we need the help with that.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

And I think you're right, I think in today's economy, although I'm not an economist or an expert on the job market, I do believe that it's going to be more difficult for the folks returning now from

Afghanistan.

**LEG. BROWNING:**

Right.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

-- than it was for Iraq, when the economy was obviously a little better, and there was more stimulus out there and there was more jobs available, so we certainly have a greater challenge. And that would be one thing that, you know, I would look for some help and some assistance with in helping to refine maybe a pool of folks that are willing to hire some veterans. And I'll tell you what, these guys, for the most part, are great guys that are capable of doing the mission under some very difficult circumstances, and they're ready, willing and able to take on the next great mission, whether it's in private industry or government work, or whatever it is, so I would recommend almost every one of them.

**LEG. BROWNING:**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Lou, I'd love to get your guidance on approach, because the way it's been explained to me is that we have to walk with our veterans, you cannot walk out in front of them, because we could not possibly presume to know fully about their experience and what they may or may not need. And we certainly want to be proactive, and so we don't want to walk behind them either, and not take a proactive stance, and not be helpful, and to wait until someone is really desperate and needs services and then becomes potentially a crisis situation. So I would ask you, you know, how best to have that approach to our returning veterans now, to be proactive, but to walk with them and not out in front of them and be presumptuous, but not to sit back and wait until --

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Sure, sure.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

-- you know, they're in dire straits either.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

I think that's a great proposal, try to get the ball rolling, but not get out in front of them. And what I probably would like to do is I'll sit down with Tom Ronayne in the next few days and we'll map out a plan. And I know he's a great advocate of the veterans and the Suffolk County veterans, and he has a whole myriad of -- a giant Rolodex of things available to him, so he's a tremendous resource for us. So I'm going to draft Tom for that, and I know he's ready and willing always to help us out.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

In fact, I do have a couple of more questions, but, Tom, maybe you can come up, and maybe, Lou, if you can stay right there.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Sorry to put you on the spot, Tom.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

It was bound to happen.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

And, obviously, employment, I've seen numbers where national statistics will show that unemployment is actually twice the rate among our returning veterans than it is in just the general population. So I don't know how that is here locally, but do you have any idea what the employment situation is for veterans here locally?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

I read and printed a study that was done by the University of Chicago last week and the numbers are staggering. What they've done is they graphed out -- pardon my cough. They've graphed out unemployment amongst veterans from the time of release from service and then they've tracked it over a 48-month period. And I can tell you that the longer a veteran is out of service, the greater the likelihood that they will become reemployed. The numbers are very, very high there. They're in the 50 percentile in some areas for two to four weeks out of uniform. After 12 months, the numbers go down. They do trend back toward being employed, but it's a slow -- it's a slow process in many cases. Certainly, we encourage and we certainly can use more support from the community, from the business owners and from the people in the community who are employing.

You know, certainly, the level of training, the level of discipline, and the work ethic of a soldier, in my humble opinion, vastly exceeds what's out there in the market today. These people are hardworking, they're well-trained, and they understand what it is to approach a mission and do what you need to do until it's completed. In any job environment, I think that's a tremendous resource.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

In small business, and Work Opportunity Act, and tax incentives, and other programs that are out there for employers to take advantage of, in your experience, these types of incentives to employers, is this the kind of thing that the general businessperson will essentially know about in our local community?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

In many cases, yes, and the reason being, not because they're trying to do the right thing for the veteran, but it's a financial incentive.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Absolutely.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

If I can hire you and for every dollar I pay you there's 30 cents coming back to my business through some Federal or State program, all other things being equal, I would certainly hire you over that equally qualified candidate.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Lou, is that an effort that we should be making as well? I mean, so often we're concerned on the returning veteran and their family. Should we be making a more aggressive push towards the private sector to raise awareness of the kinds of opportunities and incentives that are available to them?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

Well, one of the things that we've done over the past year, we actually have been focusing on employment. We've been contacting individual employers, we've been inviting them to participate in programs, and we've been inviting them to, please, entertain the veterans as candidates for the positions that they have available.

We recently held our first ever job and employment fair for all veterans in Suffolk County, and we had 50 employers, we had 50 individual employers come out from, you know, small local business owners to tremendous companies, recruiters from the New York City Fire Department. Arrow Security has hired five from that event alone. So we've definitely been working on this. Obviously, as we see more veterans returning home, we will need to, you know, further our efforts and ensure that we're providing the services and providing the access that these veterans and the business people need.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

How do you find the usage for these types of services? You know, we know that so many returning veterans don't necessarily take advantage of the health care programs that are available to them, particularly those that suffer from TBI or Post-Traumatic Stress for whatever reason. Do you find that more will utilize these job search or educational programs more so or less so than utilizing health care services?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

I think with -- pardon me. I think, without question, they're taking more advantage of it now than at any other time in our history. The generation of veterans that we're minting today are smarter, they have access to things that in the past did not exist, the technologies, the internet. There are resources available that did not exist before, and for that reason we are seeing that veterans are being exposed to more than they had been in the past. And that extends beyond just the employment, it also extends into education, and it extends into health care. The numbers of -- the percentage of veterans who present at the VA, enroll and avail themselves of the VA services is greater now than it has ever been, which we're delighted to see.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

That's great. Do you know of any specific programs, does anybody know of any specific programs that we offer at our Community College that are geared towards our returning veterans in terms of training or retraining, tuition assistance?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

There is tuition assistance, and I'm sure Lou will speak on this. The new GI Bill, the GI Bill for the 21st Century has just been revamped. It goes in -- February 8th or February 9th it actually kicks in, and there are tremendous benefits. Again, never before have we seen educational benefits, and training, and vocational training made available on the scale that they are with this new -- with this new benefit. The amount of money has increased to where you can actually apply and get a real education. There are programs in the State right now. The State has a program where eligible soldiers -- some of this is going to be based on the length of service, but eligible service -- eligible veterans in New York State can take advantage of another program right now that puts about \$8,000 in their pocket a year over and above the GI Bill. It's completely separate from the GI Bill, which, if you're a student trying to make it on government loans, you know, \$8,000 a year makes a difference. There are many, many programs out there.

One of the wonderful things about the new GI Bill is, and I think this is absolutely remarkable that they were able to actually pass this, a soldier comes home, is eligible for the GI Bill, has that money made available to him, and, for whatever reason, chooses not to take that money and go to school, the amount of money available to the veteran is transferable. He can transfer that amount of educational assistance to his spouse or his dependent, so, you know, in effect college is paid -- Jack's college is paid for --

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

-- which is not a bad thing.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Good.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

So there are good things happening. There are excellent programs out there. I've worked very closely with Lou, I've worked closely with Beth during the deployment. And I'll say, as I always say, the first thing that I would like to -- first thing I want them to do is go to the VA and enroll, get the photograph taken. The second thing they do, come to the Veterans Service Agency, seek the services of an accredited Veterans Service Officer. These people are trained, they're experienced,

and they know better than pretty much anybody out there what's available and how to access it. So, you know, the service officers, that's what they do day in and day out. That would be my recommendation.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

And, Tom, lately, how has the backlog of applications to the Veterans Administration been? Has there been any improvement lately?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

It depends on which paper you read, it depends on who you speak to. We do know that the backlog right now still stands at between six hundred and eight hundred thousand pending claims. The new Secretary has stated that that is going to be one of his primary goals, is to reduce the amount of time that those claims are taking.

As we discussed several months ago, there were problems in some of the regional offices, claims were being mishandled. There were probably a number of claims that were actually shredded before they had been adjudicated. Those problems were dealt with swiftly. There was a lot of administrative movement after that, a lot of people who were fixtures in the VA community were no more. So we're hopeful that that vet mentality, that mindset that you can treat claims in that manner has been addressed.

The thing -- what I would offer also is VA right now, it's difficult to describe, but the VA is almost two health care systems right now. You've got your traditional conventional VA as we all know it, and they've got the OIF/OEF teams. And the OIF/OEF, Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom veterans actually access the VA in an entirely different manner than a Vietnam, a Korea or a World War II Veteran would. They have special teams assigned. They're doing the PTSD and the TBI screens right up front. Their claims are being expedited. There are actually regional officers that are handling only OIF/OEF claims so that they don't sit in that pile of 600,000 pendings.

So there are good things happening. A lot of it falls to lessons learned.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

What more do you think that we can and should be thinking about in terms of assistance? Obviously, Tom and all of our hardworking, you know, County employees at the Veterans Service Agency do an outstanding job. What should all of us be thinking about now as more and more are returning home to us? What should we be doing to help?

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

I think right now my big priority is trying to get the main body of these guys gainfully employed that don't have jobs and keep them prospering in our society.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

The job assistance --

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Yeah, yeah. We seem to be on track with --

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

-- is priority one.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

-- with getting them registered in the VA and, through Tom's help, with all the benefits that are available to them. His office is a tremendous funnel or channel where things seem to happen, and then we get tremendous referrals from different Federal, State or local agencies through him, so that's working real good. I think right now my main priority, though, as Tom said, would be to get them employed and get them registered at the VA.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Okay. And are you familiar with the recent effort that they're making in Nassau County with the new program that they've just launched? And I'd be interested to get your take on it.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Yeah, sure, sure.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Is that the right model? Is it something that we should be looking at here in Suffolk?

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

I'm not up to speed entirely on what's going on in Nassau County. I know a little bit about it, and I really do like the direction that they've taken, and it seems like a fantastic partnership with private industry and local government. It seems -- it seems to be definitely a step in the right direction. I'd be tickled pink to see something like that out here in Suffolk County.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

There kind of is, we just didn't do the press.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Yeah.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

We've been working with employers, as I said, over the past year or so, and I should say more aggressively over the past year or so, and we have developed a list. We have a list of employers in the office, we have the list of employers who participated in our Job and Employment Fair. That is as of now Lou's list. We'll share any information that we can. And we have other employers who are not necessarily unique to Suffolk County, but who offer a wonderful, wonderful program. 1-800-FLOWERS, for example, is offering free computer training for returning veterans, data entry processing technician, computer skills of -- my understanding, is a pretty wide variety. Upon completion of this free training, 1-800-FLOWERS is offering the veterans employment within the company, somewhere where the skill set that they had just trained on would be appropriately applied.

So, yeah, there are good people out there doing good things. Lou and I, as he said a moment of ago, will be sitting down in the next few days and, you know, we'll work very closely with them and with the employers on pairing -- on pairing the soldiers to the jobs.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Okay. And, certainly, along the way, if there is that type of a list or a clearing house of information, please, you know, do share that information with us so that we can, you know, just increase the effort exponentially on getting the word out.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

The more people that have it, the better work we can do.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Sure. Anyone else? Okay.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

I'd just like to say for the record, welcome home. My hat is always off to the men of the Fighting 69th. The job that they did was an incredibly difficult one. The challenges and the sacrifice on

behalf of the soldiers and of their families is not something that I feel can be adequately stated in words. But I will -- I want to say just one other thing is -- where's Jack? Jack right there, Jack Delli-Pizzi is almost entirely the reason why we wear this uniform, why we go, why we do the mission, because if we don't do it, what do we leave behind for the Jacks? And, you know, they are our future. We owe them the very best of everything that we can offer them. And I salute you, Lou. Thank you.

**LIEUTENANT DELLI-PIZZI:**

Thank you. Booyah.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

Booyah.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Lou, to you and to everybody who serves our nation, very simply but sincerely, thank you.

*(Applause and Standing Ovation)*

Okay. We have one item on our Legislative agenda today, it is a ***Procedural Motion 01 - Designating Veterans Organizations to receive funding for Memorial Day Observances for 2009 (Stern)***. I'll make a motion to approve, second by Vice Chairman Eddington. All in favor? Any opposition? Any abstention? Motion carries ***(Vote: Approved 5-0-0-0)***. Anybody else?

**LEG. BROWNING:**

No.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Anybody else? All right, very good. We are adjourned. Thank you.

***[THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED AT 12:23 P.M.]***