

VETERANS & SENIORS COMMITTEE

of the

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

Minutes

A regular meeting of the Veterans & Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, 725 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on March 16, 2009.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

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

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Sarah Simpson, Assistant Counsel
Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency
Holly Rhodes-Teague, Director of Office for the Aging
Lance Reinheimer, Assistant Director of Budget Review Office
Benny Pernice, Budget Review Office
Alicia Howard, Clerk
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Leader
Linda Bay, Aide to Minority Leader
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
Rob Calarco, Aide to Leg. Eddington
Josh Slaughter, Aide to Leg. Browning
Bob Martinez, Aide to Leg. Montano
Catherine Stark, Aide to Leg. Schneiderman
Debra Alloncius, AME Legislative Director
Lori Ann Taggart, Intergovernmental Relations Coordinator
Kate Rowe, College Dean of Enrollment Management
Tom Coleman, Assistant Academic Chair of Psychology Department/Faculty Advisor of Veterans Club
And all other interested parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Kraus, Court Stenographer

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:34 PM

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Welcome everybody. Ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by legislator Browning.

SALUTATION

Please remain standing for a moment of silence for our brave men and women fighting overseas. I ask that you keep them in your thoughts and prayers.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

Thank you.

Okay, good morning. I don't have any cards. Is there any member of the public who would like to address the Committee? Seeing none, we have a couple of presentations today. But before we get to those presentations, we do have a tabled resolution that I'd like to address now.

TABLED RESOLUTIONS

I guess I'll take a motion to take it out of order.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Vice Chairman Eddington. IR 1062 is before us.

IR 1062, accepting the donation of a Gold Star Families Monument and authorizing the placement and siting of the Gold Star Families monument in Armed Forces Plaza.

(Beedenbender) This had been tabled previously because it had to go before the Siting Committee. It has gone before the Siting Committee; and having been approved by that Committee it is now eligible to come before us. So I'll entertain a motion. Motion to approve by --

LEG. BROWNING:

We didn't vote yet on the -- bring it --

CHAIRMAN STERN:

We did. Oh, I didn't call that vote, right.

LEG. BROWNING:

There's a motion and a second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? It is now before us.

LEG. BROWNING:

I'll make a motion to approve.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Motion by Legislator Browning, seconded by Leg. Schneiderman. Anybody on the motion? Okay. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? That motion is approved. **(Vote: 4-0-0-1. Leg. Montano not present. Vote changes to 5-0, see page 6)**

Before we get to the main topic of today, let me first call Holly to come up and say hello.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

Hello. Thank you. I haven't been here in a while because we've had our Advisory Board the same time as this meeting so I'm happy to be here today. They're all happy that I'm here today, too, from the Advisory Board.

Just a little bit of an update, the luncheon is May 14th. We're taking registrations now. Approximately 400 people are registered already. So that -- I hope you can clear your calendars and be there for. That'll be at the Lombardi's.

The other thing I just wanted to give you a heads up on is the HEAP Program. Tentative date for its closing depending on funding is May 15th. We have seen a very large number of applications this year. Already we're running 20 percent ahead of where we were last year. For the whole year last year we did 5400 applications. We're running, I think, 63, 6400 applications now in our office. We only do the over age 60. So it has been a large increase in the number of people who have been requesting assistance with the home energy. So that's just for your information, you know, it's almost twenty percent. And we have been able to keep up -- those applications once we process -- they're processed, they go to DSS for their final approval because we are the subcontractor to DSS so we have to -- and then they do the final -- the final benefit.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And, Holly, in general how long does that process usually take?

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

We've been moving them out very fast this year because we streamlined our process. But at DSS, I believe, there's a little bit of a backlog going so I'm not sure how long it's taking once they leave our office. They leave our office within a week or two; it's very quick. But then it's over at DSS for their -- their final approval.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

So we would need to ask them really.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

Yes. Like I said I'm a lowly subcontractor. Does anybody have questions, anything you need from me in terms of information? No. Okay, thanks.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thanks Holly.

Okay, Tom?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good morning, Chairman, members.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Good morning.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you for the invitation to return.

I don't have a great deal to report on this morning. Obviously we continue to work very hard with

our veterans and their families. We've been -- I've actually been in contact with one of our Suffolk residents who are still on the ground in Afghanistan working very hard, just keeping in contact with him to let him know that we continue to support him and his mission.

We've worked -- since our last meeting I guess the only thing of note that has occurred is we had a mini-open house, if you will, at the Bay Shore Armory for the Fighting 69th. There were quite a number of county service providers in attendance. We had Health, Mental Health. Suffolk Community College was in attendance. Obviously our offices. DSS was there, Labor, Civil Service, the Police Department. So Suffolk County was very well represented in terms of being available to provide services to the soldiers and their families.

The turnout could have been better; it certainly could have been worse. We extended the event by a little bit to give stragglers an opportunity to come in. And that proved to be -- that proved to be worthwhile. We did get a number of troops arriving at the armory after the event was scheduled to have ended. So that worked out well.

We continue to have folks from around the Island deploying again in small numbers, not en masse the way a lot of communities are seeing but we continue to have folks from the 106th in Westhampton deploying. They're headed over. And, you know, again, we're just -- we're ready, willing and able to provide services. We do have a -- I know this sounds like deja vu all over again, we have a new director at the Northport VA Medical Center. This is, I think, including acting directors the fifth in two years. The good news is he's a career VA executive. He's been assigned in executive positions pretty much throughout the northeast. The good news is that given his senior level and his longevity at the VA, he's been assured by upper management that he will not there on a temporary basis. He's there for as long as he wishes for his career to continue on and he has no intentions of leaving or retiring.

The other good news is despite his assignments throughout the northeast, he's a native Huntintonian. So he's a local fellow. We have met since his arrival to the medical center. We are planning now to have a -- sort of a more executive meet and greet during the month of April once he's had a chance to assimilate into his responsibilities at the medical center. Probably it would be myself, one representative from the County Executive's Office. Mr. Moschitta. Phil Moschitta is the new director's name. Joe Sledge from the medical center and hope we're going forward.

On a similar topic with the VA, we have received back from the general contractor the bids and the documents for the CBOC VA clinic in Riverhead. They have done a budget. They went out for preliminary bids in order to establish that we'd be able to maintain our budget. The budget -- the bids did come back within budget. And we were able to give VA on paper in terms of the floor plan everything that they had asked for except for one exam room, which in the grand scheme of things, I think, is quite an accomplishment.

The documents have now been forwarded back to the VA. They are being reviewed. And provided that there's no substantive disagreement with what we've submitted, we hope to be able to go to contract on this thing and put the proverbial shovel in the ground sooner than later. A lot of people worked very hard on this for a long time. You know, certainly for it to come to fruition now while we're still at war and while we still have service men and women deploying and returning is really a testament to Suffolk County's commitment.

And, you know, certainly I thank the County Executive for his efforts. I thank this body, the committee for all their efforts. I know at various times many of you have, you know, hit the road and gone out there and we've walked the spaces. There's been a lot of effort and a lot of support and lot of cooperation on the part of the Legislature. And that is much appreciated; not only by myself but I can tell you by the County Executive's Veterans Advisory Board who represent, as you know, the vast majority of the organized veterans service organizations in the county. So that being said, that's very good news. We're anticipating that there shouldn't be any more -- any more grief with this.

The Armed Forces Plaza, the addition of the Gold Star monument, I can tell you has been met with absolute joy on the part of the Gold Star families. They're elated that we got through the Siting Committee last week which we had hoped would be the final obstacle. We, you know, have spoken to a number of them. They're very grateful that this is going to be happening. It's been a longtime coming as well. This is something that the County Executive and I have been working on for a number of years. And many thanks -- he's not here with us but many thanks have to go out to Legislator Beedenbender who really in the seventh inning picked up the ball and ran with it and got us to the point where we are now.

The monument is now in fabrication. The granite is being cut. We are hoping for -- we're looking right now on a planned May 9th ground breaking. We would hope that the members of the Committee, if able, would be able to join us at the groundbreaking.

The location of the monument is going to be just forward. And we're meeting with DPW next week to determine whether it's going to be offset to the left or the right of the monument for women veterans. We had a preliminary location. But when we further examined the preliminary location, if you looked at the monument from Veterans Highway where most people would be looking, the new monument would obscure the women veterans monument. Certainly we don't want that to be the case.

Again, May 9th is the projected ground breaking. The monument dedication right now is scheduled for September 20th. The reason for that is the third weekend of September is National Gold Star Families Day -- National Gold Star Families week. There is an event that takes place in Washington at the National Gold Star Monument. It's not necessarily an easy task for some of the families on Long Island to make that trip given that we have so many Gold Star families on Long Island. This was very, very appropriate to move forward with and we're just about there. May 9th we hope to put shovels in the ground.

I'd be happy to answer any questions.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Any questions? All right, so good news. Good things happening. That's great. Thanks, Tom.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Motion to reconsider 1062 by Legislator Schneiderman. I'll second. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? IR 1062 is back before us.

IR 1062, accepting donation of Gold Star Families Monument and authorizing the placement and siting of the Gold Star Families monument in Armed Forces Plaza.

(Beedenbender) I'll make a motion to approve. Second by Legislator Montano. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? Motion carries. **(Vote: 5-0)**

LEG. MONTANO:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Sure.

PRESENTATION

VICE CHAIR EDDINGTON:

Good afternoon. Oh, good morning still. Hi. I appreciate you coming to make this presentation. And I think we met in my office, didn't we? Yeah, we did.

MR. COLEMAN:

Yes, we did.

VICE CHAIR EDDINGTON:

I have had a number of veterans come to see me about transitioning. Dowling College had a project that I think I had talked to George about and I was hopping that you could fill us in on what you're doing to help the financial transition.

MS. TAGGART:

Thank you very much. Good morning, Vice Chair Eddington, members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about the new GI bill and the efforts of Suffolk Community College has undertaken to provide enhanced services to veteran students as they navigate this new program. My name is Lori Ann Taggart. And I'm the Intergovernmental Relations Coordinator for Suffolk County Community College.

As a brief introduction to the post 9/11 GI bill recently passed by congress, eligible veterans who have served a minimum of 90 days on active duty after September 10, 2001 are eligible for enhanced benefits beginning August 1st, 2009.

Under the new bill full-time veteran students may be eligible for up to hundred percent paid tuition, a monthly housing stipend and a stipend of up to \$1000 a year for books and supplies. The tuition payment levels are based on the rate of tuition and fees for the most expensive in state undergraduate public college for the state in which the student enrolls.

For New York the rate is estimated to be \$970 per credit hour plus \$2400 in fees. Because of the affordability of Suffolk County Community College a veteran attending our institution could be eligible for a full tuition and fees paid by this GI bill.

In addition to tuition and fees, veteran students are eligible for tutorial assistance up to \$100 a month. Under the new program veterans are generally entitled to 36 months of educational assistance. And these benefits are transferable to family members if the individual has as of August 1, 2009 served at least six years in the armed forces and agrees to serve at least another four years. Eligibility expires 15 years from the date of the last discharge or release from active duty of at least 90 days.

With me today are Kate Rowe, College Dean of Enrollment Services and Thomas Coleman, Assistant Academic Chair of our Psychology Department and faculty advisor of the college's Veterans Club, who will provide an overview of the services that the college has established in anticipation of an increase veteran student population. Kate?

MS. ROWE:

Thank you. And thank you for the opportunity to show you how we are welcoming and will continue to welcome veterans. I've prepared just a very brief power point because you don't want me talking more than I absolutely have to. So this is the Veterans In Transition.

POWER POINT PRESENTATION

We are really uniquely situated and prepared to work with veterans right now. We have over 200 student veterans on our three campuses now. And we are providing them services now on demand actually as needed.

So the services are all in place. We are a member of the SOC consortium. That is the consortium of service members colleges. That means that we have a very generous attitude towards transferring credits. As you know members of the service often attend maybe three or four different colleges depending on where they're living at the time and what base they're on. So we're committed to using as many of those credits as we can in transfer.

We're also a ConAP participating school which means if someone today enlists in the army, they can also apply to Suffolk, be accepted and that acceptance will remain current until they're separated from the service. So those are just some very brief overview comments.

Now, the services at Suffolk that we feel among the many that we feel would be very useful to veterans are the career exploration which runs through our career services offices. And that's usually at the beginning of the process for those who want to explore what they might like to do. But in addition we also have the job connection which is a web base list of jobs that are available now, internships as well. And also at the end of the process resume writing, all of the skills that you would need really to be successful in looking for a job.

Academic and personal counseling to keep a student veteran on track. Disability services, that is both physical disabilities and learning disabilities. Generous transfer credit policy which we just talked about. We typically right now use the DD 214 to identify MOS's, to identify service school training for credit. The American Council on Education produces guides that really are very voluminous and very accurate. And we use those. We can also use other materials that the veteran might present to us for credit.

Also very common in the services are taking DONTES exams or CLEP exams. And we have no problem with transferring either of those. And as a member of SOC we also will take into consideration any credits they've taken anywhere else.

In addition to that you've already met Tom. And he heads up the Veterans Club and there's Veterans Club support. So we feel that that is also very useful for someone trying to make a transition.

And how will we make sure that these kinds of services are obvious, are right on the front page as it were? One of the them is that we've created just recently service to veterans teams. There's a team on each campus. It consists of a member of the Admissions Office, a member of the Financial Aid Office and a member of the Registrar's Office on each campus so that they can help them streamline and navigate through the college environment.

We also are looking into reinitiating the veterans work study program which would allow us to employ one or more veterans on each campus depending on what our enrollment will allow to assist these teams with veterans. I think that would be very helpful. Not every, you know, admissions officer can talk to a veteran in the way another veteran can. So we hope that those will be helpful.

And then I would like to show you the website that we've created as another way to let veterans know that we welcome them, we want them to come to Suffolk and we will do everything we can to make their academic experience successful.

As you can see, this is our home page of the college. Here is our veterans website. It may not always be on home page but it will be there particularly during times of registration.

So what this lists here are how to apply. It kind of brings all of the things that we've just talked about together in one place. This will bring them right to the application. Okay, with directions and what have you. It can be down loaded as well. It can be done right on line. Credits the military service. This outlines some of the ways in which we do this and gives them directions on who to contact.

Here you have student life counseling and advising career services, disability services. And each of these is a link. So you can go -- if you wanted to look at what clubs are available, you'd go here. It'll also talk about athletics, etcetera. Can I go back?

Yeah, let me just go back this way. It'll be easier just to go back to the home page this way. So each of those is a link. And then you have the veterans educational benefits where we have a link at the bottom to the registrars/paid which gives them the information on the new veterans benefits. And then here is a description of the veterans group and club list for the campuses.

And this is a comments form. If they have questions that they can't find an answer for here, and it's convenient for them to use this form, this will come directly to my office. So that's just a brief outline of what we have.

And across the top you also have the academic skill centers with numbers. You have the scholarship search, which I think is very important. This is both and continuing students. And programs of study, courses and then links.

So I think pretty much we have all of our information here. And I think I may have skipped our teams, service to veteran teams, which actually gives the names and numbers of the different members of the teams on the Ammerman, Grant and Eastern Campus. So this is accessible from the home page. And we feel -- in this way we not only have the services they need, but we can really give them quick access to an overview.

Thank you. And I think, Tom, you wanted to talk a little bit about --

VICE CHAIR EDDINGTON:

Any questions? Legislator Browning.

LEG. BROWNING:

It's really nice to see what you're doing here. I have a question for you because, you know, my son's currently deployed. And he's been going to Suffolk Community. And I believe there is something in place, if they're deployed in the middle of a semester and now they can't complete their classes, what do you do for them?

MS. ROWE:

Well, we actually were discussing this. Certainly if they're deployed in the middle of the semester, no charges apply when they leave. They can contact the professor and get all the assignments for the balance of that class and they can get credit at the end. But we're working on -- that's kind of an unofficial. We're working on making that a policy that that can be done, particularly someone who's put in, invested half or better of the semester.

LEG. BROWNING:

Yeah. Because I know he didn't sign up for classes because he knew he was going away so -- plus there's internet courses, right --

MS. ROWE:

Yes. Many, many.

LEG. BROWNING:

-- if they're deployed? Because I got an email from him in which I'm kind of happy to hear that he's board and it's quiet. So that's a good thing.

MS. ROWE:

We like that.

LEG. BROWNING:

So, you know, he may have time on his hands to maybe do something on the internet while he's there.

MS. ROWE:

We have some of the largest number of courses in the SUNY system on line. So, yes, he can do that.

Tom?

MR. COLEMAN:

Legislator Browning, if I could comment on that, excuse my rookie woes with the microphone, we're actually trying to -- I've been trying to -- and actually Legislator Eddington, that's why I contacted you last year. I'm currently trying to work on -- trying to formulate a program where we're going to be proactively contacting Suffolk County residents while they're serving actively. It is my goal to have the college be able to identify Suffolk County residents currently serving abroad whether or not they're in a combat area or not and be able to provide them with an introduction letter, information on the GI bill, information on financial aid and have them apply from wherever they may be serving so that they may be accepted to the college and then enroll in on line courses to kind of get a jump on what they might want to do once they return.

And once they return they would already be admitted and they'd be able to then continue on with their studies if that's what they choose to do. So it's timely that you mention that because that's something that we're actually currently working on trying to do. The problem that we're running into and that we've run into for quite some time is having the ability to identify those Suffolk County residents because of confidentiality issues with the Department of Defense, which are understandable.

We're currently trying to get around that or -- not get around but get through that issue and be able to find those residents of the county around so that we can, you know, proactively contact them. So it speaks directly to what your concerns were.

LEG. BROWNING:

Okay, thank you.

VICE CHAIR EDDINGTON:

I have a question. One of the issues that have come to me is the payment. And what the GI's will tell me is that they're waiting for their payment, but they have to enroll. And some of them were putting it on credit cards, which I'm really not happy with. What have you been able to do to alleviate that problem?

MS. ROWE:

Well, we haven't been able to do much to alleviate that problem because it's not -- primarily it's not with us. We do the certification almost immediately as soon as they're enrolled.

So we've established a committee, a service to veterans committee through which these teams will report. And one of the things that's on the docket for the next meeting is how we can defer payment for veterans. So there may be something -- you may have more information on that.

MS. TAGGART:

Actually, yes. In the new bill the payment actually goes directly to the institution. So we'll be working on that but it should alleviate a lot of the past problems that they had in terms of the timing of receiving the benefits versus the timing of when the tuition was due. So that is a change in this new bill. And it should alleviate those problems but again --

VICE CHAIR EDDINGTON:

So that you'll know that the finances are going to come directly to you so you're more likely to tell

them they don't have put up anything.

MS. TAGGART:

Exactly.

MS. ROWE:

Well, we would then handle it like a third party payment.

VICE CHAIR EDDINGTON:

Okay.

MS. ROWE:

So in that case they would not have to put up anything.

VICE CHAIR EDDINGTON:

Great. Oh, that's good. Keep me updated on that how goes. Thank you. Is there any other questions? Concerns? Well, then I'll take a motion to adjourn.

LEG. MONTANO:

Motion.

VICE CHAIR EDDINGTON:

By Legislator Montano. I'll second that. Thank you very much for being here.

**THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 2:12 PM
{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**