

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 August 10, 2009.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

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

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Renee Ortiz, Chief Deputy Clerk
Sarah Simpson, Assistant Counsel
Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency
Holly Rhodes-Teague, Director of Office for the Aging
Craig Freas, Budget Review Office
Benny Pernice, Budget Review Office
Paul Perillie, Aide to majority leader
Linda Bay, Aide to minority leader
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
Bob Martinez, Aide to Leg. Montano
Catherine Stark, Aide to Leg. Schneiderman
Debra Alloncius, AME Legislative Director
Michael Pitcher, Aide to Presiding Officer
Jack Caffey, Aide to Presiding Officer
Steve Tricaraco, Aide to County Executive
Dennis Brown, County Attorney's Office
Don Gomez, Iraq/Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA)
Cara Hammer, IAVA
And all other interested parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

MINUTES TRANSCRIBED BY:

Denise Weaver, Legislative Aide

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:41 AM

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Welcome to the Committee on Veterans and Seniors. I ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Montano.

SALUTATION

I ask everybody to please remain standing and join us in a moment of silence as we remember Farmingdale native and St. Anthony's High School graduate, James D. Argentine, killed in Afghanistan, Thursday, August 6th; and as we remember all of our brave men and women fighting for our freedom overseas.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

Thank you.

Before I begin, I'd also like to make an announcement. I think that a copy was distributed to all of my colleagues and our staffs today, but to announce that on November 8th at 9:30 AM there will be a series of walks and runs as a part of the second annual Run for the Warriors. That is to begin at Town Hall in the Town of Babylon in Lindenhurst. Registration is now open. And anybody that would like more information we have it here and hoping that my colleagues will bring this information back to their offices and distribute as -- to get as many participants as we can for an important cause. Okay.

Holly.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

Hi. I just wanted to ask for everybody's support for the two reso's that are, I think, laid on the table today. They were laid on the table last week, you should have them, for the American Recovery Investment Act Funds. We are receiving a little over \$200,000 per congregate meals and little over a 100,000 for home delivered meals. This federal money will allow us to provide additional meals for seniors at no additional cost to the County because our match, which is 10% is already -- we can already find the match within existing County dollars. So it'll be no additional County dollars needed to accept this over \$300,000. So hopefully you'll all support that. Any questions?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Anybody, anybody? Okay.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

Thanks.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly, thank you.

It is my pleasure to welcome Army Sergeant, Don Gomez, of IAVA and Cara Hammer of IAVA to share with us some important information that we all need to be concerned about and information that's very important to be distributed as necessary throughout our -- all of our districts. Guys, why don't you have a seat right here. IAVA, the Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, I think everybody should have materials that were distributed. Okay. Welcome. Welcome, thanks so much for being with us today.

MR. GOMEZ:

Thank you very much. This is Cara Hammer. I'm Don Gomez. Thank you very much for us having here. We understand Suffolk County has the largest number of veterans in the country, I believe, or at least the State of New York.

Just to introduce myself, I'm Don Gomez. I was a Sergeant with the 82nd Airborne Division. I served two tours of duty in Iraq. Once during the invasion and then again in the summer of 2005. I'm from New York. I'm from Queens, but I'm of kind of on the border of Nassau County and Queens so I live in the suburbs. I don't have the taint of the city.

A little bit about IAVA. IAVA's the nations first and largest non-profit organization that represents this generation of veterans. We have over 125,000 members, about 35,000 of those are veterans. IAVA is the face of this generation of veterans. One of the interesting things about what we do is we're connected with the veterans that have already served and are home and are reintegrating. But we also have a large portion of our members who are still serving. So we have a good handle on the issues that are facing these veterans and we kind of -- we know what's going to happen kind of before everyone else does because we're talking, we're communicating with one another.

One of our most recent achievements was the passing of the New GI Bill, which went into effect this month. And this New GI Bill's going to send this generation of veterans to school in a way -- very similar to what happened after World War II. It's a very generous increase in benefits. I'll be using the GI -- the New GI Bill this October. And I've been on the old GI Bill. And I can tell you personally it's going to help me a great deal in helping me achieve my dream of getting a college education.

IAVA does two things mainly. It's an advocacy organization. We have a branch in Washington, which meets regularly with congressmen to push the issues forward. Our issue this year is advanced appropriations for the VA.

The second thing that IAVA does is the membership organization. It's kind of the VFW Hall of the 21st century. And we have a pretty substantial online presence. We have this thing called communityofveterans.org. And what this it's a Facebook for veterans. You have to have served in Iraq or Afghanistan to get membership. It's vetted. You can go on there and you can talk to other people who have similar experiences.

We also have newGIBill.org. This is what I would urge you to

communicate to your constituents who are from Iraq and Afghanistan to visit. They can go to newGIBill.org. There's a calculator on that web page and they can figure out what they're going to a -- the benefits they're going to receive based on their service and where they're going to go to school. It's a very good website. It just launched.

We also -- you may have seen recently on -- we have a few commercials that run, probably the most famous one is that started last year. It's got a veteran going through LaGuardia Airport and there's nobody there. We partnered with the Ad Council to build that. And at the end of it it directs veterans who are coming home to go to communityofveterans.org.

We continue to move forward with whatever the new issues facing veterans are. This year, as I said, it's advanced appropriations. One of the other things we're pushing for and is gaining headway is mandatory mental health screening for veterans as they come back. One of the big issues is people come home and in the past they've been forced to fill out kind of like bubble sheets of issues. And we know that there's two many issues coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan, PTSD and traumatic brain injury. And the best way to identify those is through mandatory screening with a health care professional. And that's something that we're pushing forward.

I would urge you to use IAVA as a resource. We're here for you. You can go to IAVA.org. Our website's there. You have our contact information in the sheets. And if you have any questions about anything regarding veterans, specifically this generation of veterans, we're here for you. That's all I have for you this morning. So thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Cara?

MS. HAMMER:

My name is Cara Hammer. I won't beat what he said into the ground. But I also was an Army Sergeant with the 1st Infantry Division. And I work for IAVA. And I would just like to, you know, again say that if we can be a resource at all to you, we would be more than happy to. Thanks for having us.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Well, thanks for being here. You had referred to the information regarding the Post-9/11 GI Bill. I think this comes from your website, which by the way is outstanding. And really I know for me and in our office it will be literally our first stop when we're looking for important information for those that we represent because it really just does an outstanding job. But on that website, you can go and get this GI Bill checklist, which is wonderful resource. It's probably the best explanation of the GI Bill and the resources that it offers and who qualifies. And any one of us really could sit with our constituents and take them through this checklist to determine, you know, what is available to them and how to go about making application for those benefits. So on this checklist specifically, but on all of your materials and on the website, congratulations, it is really a great job.

MS. HAMMER:

Thank you.

MR. GOMEZ:

Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

In your discussions with veterans returning, those that are still in the field, you know, what would you say is the top one or two issues that they are facing and what can and should we be doing to help?

MR. GOMEZ:

Well, for those coming home, the number one -- the number one issue in people that are returning home is to make sure that they're coming home and that they're okay. A lot of these -- the injuries that people are coming home with are invisible. We call them invisible injuries. You can't see them. They have a hard time readjusting and that's not everybody. This is some people who come home. And as Legislators or family members or friends, the best thing you can do is be available, to know where the resources are. And our website has all of the resources; not just us, but we link to everybody else because there's all kinds of specialty fields that deal with some of these different things.

For those who are just reintegrating into life, the website NewGIBill.org is probably the best thing that you can direct someone to, especially with the downturn in the economy, this New GI Bill -- it's paying -- just to put it in really frank terms, it's paying you to go to school. I have friends right now who are -- never considered college, ever. And now they are because they're saying, *I can make more money going to school. I can go to school get B's or C's and come out with a degree, but I'm getting paid to go to school and I can do it without sacrificing like you would have under the old GI Bill system.*

So, yeah, I would urge constituents to go to school and be available to them as a resource.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Question? No, no? Anybody? Well good. Well, again, I urge all of my colleagues and we'll try and get copies to those that are not with us today also of your materials that you've given to us and let everybody know about the website and the resources that your organization offers. Important for all of us to know about it and to get the word out as much as we can. So thank you both for your service and we, of course, wish you every success in the future. And Sergeant Gomez, well maybe you can tell everybody about what you have coming up.

MR. GOMEZ:

I am a student. I'm studying the Middle East, the net, came from my two deployments and I'm going to Egypt at the end of month. I'll be there for this semester. So I'll be in Egypt. I'll send pictures.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. What a great experience and again we wish you every success.

MR. GOMEZ:

Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. Thank you.

Tom.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Chairman, members, good morning.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director, good morning.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good morning. I apologize for being late. I was detained at the office, but I also thank you for taking me out of order. I think Debbie Harris had explained to the Chairman.

We have some activity occurring today surrounding the preparations for the remains of Lance Corporal James Argentine from Farmingdale who was killed on Thursday of last week. And I need to be present for one of those meetings in just a little while, so thank you.

Really, what I had hoped to speak briefly on today and I walked in late, I think I may have missed part of my own presentation so to speak, I think a lot of this may have already been covered. The Post-9/11 GI Bill or the GI Bill for the 21st century, as of August 3rd is now officially fully implemented. It's out there. It's published. And soldiers and sailors are really in a position now to take great advantage of a program that is providing benefits to them that have not been seen in literally decades. It's been over a generation since benefits of this caliber have been available. And I encourage every eligible veteran to please take advantage of it. It is really wonderful.

And it goes so far beyond just serving the service member. One of the things that has been done with this new veterans benefits legislation is it is tied to the length of the service members service, but there is actually a component in this bill where if the service member -- if the eligible service member chooses to not use his GI Bill benefits, he can transfer those benefits to a spouse or dependent. I mean, to me that is remarkable. If I had my degree before I went into service and I come home and I don't need to go back to school or if I choose not to go to school, just knowing that I can transfer my benefit to little Johnny or little Suzie, boy, doesn't that take the weight of the world off your shoulders in so many ways knowing that financially you'll be able to provide for at least one of your child's education?

So there are some provisions of this legislation that I think just go so far beyond taking good care of our service members as we so very certainly should. But it really they -- I think they looked at this one with both eyes open and I'm very pleased with it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

That's great.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I urge you --

CHAIRMAN STERN:

On that, yeah, Legislator Eddington.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

I wanted to ask you because I think I read this but I want to clarify, I mean, when I came back from overseas, I went to school. I went to a private school, St. John's University. And I was married and I got a \$180 for four months because that's what they considered the semester. Of course I was going -- living in Queens on the Queens/Nassau border, paying \$240 a month rent and a \$1000 a semester to St. John's. So, I mean, I took like a \$10,000 loan to get my undergraduate degree.

My understanding is that absolutely won't happen to the veterans today. That whatever school they choose to go to, the tuition will be covered?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The way I read it is, the bill will cover the cost -- the highest cost of the state school for the home of record of that soldier. So in New York, it would be the highest tuition for any SUNY or CUNY school. If you attend a SUNY or a CUNY school, they'll pay your bill. If you choose to attend a private institution they will pay the equivalent of the value of that SUNY or CUNY tuition and you would be responsible for the differential.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Okay. It doesn't quite go where I was hoping it would go then. I'd like to see a veteran be able to go to any institution of higher learning and not have to pay a cent.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

There are other -- I'm at a loss for the word.

MR. GOMEZ:

Can I, I apologize --

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Yeah, yeah, please.

MR. GOMEZ:

-- just interject.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

But you need to come up to the microphone.

MR. GOMEZ:

Sure. I apologize.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

No, certainly don't apologize, that's why we're grateful that you're here.

MR. GOMEZ:

There is one provision, the Yellow Ribbon Program. I don't know if you guys are familiar with it, but that covers that gap. So let's say you wanted to go to Columbia, Columbia's part of the Yellow Ribbon Program, they'll take that portion of the highest state tuition and they'll pay for the rest. So there's -- but the private schools have to sign up for it. The good thing is a lot of them have.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Excellent.

MR. GOMEZ:

Yeah.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Well, then if -- we certainly could help maybe work with the colleges and universities to ask them to participate in any way, certainly I would be willing to jump on board with that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

This is a Yellow Ribbon Program that private institutions participate in voluntarily. Is it a large program or are the majority of universities involved or is it a smaller number, do you know?

MR. GOMEZ:

I don't know the number. I think over a hundred.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

While he's on his way up, I know that Adelphi and some of the other local institutions have already signed on board with this. This is what I was searching for. **{Indicating}** But please continue.

MR. GOMEZ:

I don't know the exact number. Over a hundred -- I know over a hundred have signed up. But it is pretty big. And a lot of the big named schools have signed up for this program. So if you want to go to those schools you don't have to go to CUNY or SUNY school. I go to a CUNY school, it's fine for me. But if I wanted to go to Columbia, I could.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Browning.

LEG. BROWNING:

Yeah, the -- you know, my son's actually using the GI Bill. He's still with the Air National Guard so he's doing the community college. And so -- and I know that he was told he had to go to a SUNY school, but -- so the Yellow Ribbon Program, who pays for that? Is that additional federal money?

MR. GOMEZ:

I'm not sure where the money comes from. I think it's a combination of things. I think the school is saying, *we're going to cover some of this cost*. I think there's other organizations, I don't know if it's coming from the federal government. But whatever -- they cover the rest. So for a school like Columbia or NYU where the tuition's very high, it's

covering the majority of the tuition cost. And you're still getting all of the other benefits that you'd get with the New GI Bill. So it's a very good program.

LEG. BROWNING:

Okay.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

There's a matching funds portion of it where the schools pay a portion and the bill pays a portion.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Are the participating schools listed anywhere? Are they listed on your website or some other resource?

MR. GOMEZ:

There's a -- the Yellow Ribbon Program has a web page. I don't know what it is. But we have links to it. So if you wanted to see what schools participate, you can go to NewGIBill.org and there's a way to get there from there so that you can find what schools you can go to.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Director.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

All right. In addition to the GI Bill, most states and in New York we happen to be very fortunate even in light of the current economic situation, there is money available through New York State, which is over and above the GI Bill. In New York State that number right is about \$8000 per soldier, which, you know, \$8000 in your pocket makes -- could make the difference between having to work to go school. I said, the bills are mostly paid under the bill, but there's a lot of freedom that comes with that additional state funds. How long that'll be there, I think I've said before here, I don't know. I suspect that sooner than later somebody's going to realize how beneficial it is and they'll find a way to change that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

But right now, Tom, those state funds could be used for living expenses. They don't have to be applied towards tuition or other expenses?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Living expenses, books.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

That's great.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yeah, which is tremendous; which is really, really wonderful. And again, we hope, we certainly through our office press the issue when we encounter veterans in the office, we encourage everybody to, if not take advantage of it, at least educate themselves and know what is available to them so that they have the option of making an informed decision.

The other thing is, and I think when I walked in, there was a question being fielded about some of the issues that are being encountered when the service members are returning home. And I couldn't agree more, the PTSD and the TBI are just at the top of the -- at the top of the list. And it's something that VA is getting much better at dealing with, but we still have a long way to go. There are a lot of folks out there who are having very -- just extreme difficulty. And there's a long road ahead of them in treating them and caring for their disabilities. But, again, we've come a long way. And unfortunately because it's become such a prevalent -- well, they've both become such prevalent disabilities in these wars, the experience level is increasing exponentially at VA, so they're getting much better at dealing with these issues.

A couple of the things that we don't often hear about when we talk about when the soldiers return home, and they're just as traumatic and just as life altering are the personal issues. We hear so much about the economy. There's a wonderful piece of legislation out there that I've spoken to a number of times in front of this body known as the Servicemen's and Sailors Civil Relief Act. It's wonderful legislation. It provides vast protections for service members and their dependents while they're deployed.

Unfortunately, and I attribute it to a -- I'll call it a lack of education, but I know the services are putting this information out there to the soldiers. The problem is there is so much being presented that you can't digest everything. And this stuff falls through the cracks frequently and the soldiers don't realize that it is available to them.

The biggest problem with the Soldiers and Sailors Civil Relief Act is that the service member when he receives orders must invoke it. You can't presume that American Express or Ford Motor Credit is going to know that you're being deployed. You've got to physically communicate with your creditors and your debt holders and let them know that you'll be deployed. Generally you provide a copy of your orders.

And what that does is that it freezes in some cases interest accruals, it lowers credit card rates, it precludes your bank or your lending institution from foreclosing or evicting. There are so many protections under this Act. And when we -- again, when we go to pre-deployment events and post-deployment events, we always try to get something out there about the Soldiers and Sailors Civil Relief Act. But it is just so vitally important. And unfortunately not a lot of the service members are educated to the level that they need to be on these things.

There's so many unfortunate things that occur while people are deployed because the bills don't get paid. You know, if you woke up yesterday morning and you're the guy who runs the local hardware store up in town, you're earning a living wage, you're earning a \$100,000. When you put the uniform on tomorrow and you're a corporal nobody, your earnings have evaporated. You've gone from earning a \$100,000 a year to 20 or \$22,000 a year, you can't pay your bills at the same level. The Civil Relief Act provides protections for you in those instances. And it also allows you to have the peace of mind while you're deployed, while you're over as a warfighter to know that your family is not in financial jeopardy, that there are protections in

place that -- your focus can be on your job and your mission and not distracting and bringing you back to concerns about what's going on at home and are the wife and kids okay, are the parents okay. It's a tremendously important piece of legislation. And I would just hope -- and I know you guys are aware of it and I know that the, you know, the various veterans service organizations try to get the word out but --

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, there are so many great men and women in our community who are striving to provide that kind of information and service to our, you know, servicemen and women. Nassau County Bar Association, Suffolk County Bar Association they have, you know, groups of attorneys that are more than ready, willing and able to provide services pro bono to servicemen and women and guide them through these protections. And they say that they have a large number of professionals who are ready to provide that kind of assistance with not enough servicemen and women taking advantage of their services.

So I would ask you, I would ask Sergeant Gomez if these are the kinds of services that your organization provides. And if not, are these the kind of referrals that you make, and what kind of numbers do you see coming in? And is that nearly large enough and, you know, what we can do to get that information out there in a much larger way. Because the Director is absolutely right, that these are protections that are there already. I mean, this is not any kind of proposed legislation. These are protections that are well settled at this point, but unfortunately not taken advantage of nearly enough.

MR. GOMEZ:

I can say from our standpoint from IAVA, is usually veterans don't seek these things out until there's an issue. So when something happens, that's when they start Googling, that's when they get to IAVA.org. And right up there at the top there's a big tab that says resources. They click that and then there's a list -- well, there's a short list of topics: Mental health, education, insurance, things like that. They click that and then there's a much bigger list of all the little organizations that are specializing.

I don't know where the National Guard Association's -- where they fall in there. I'm sure they do somewhere. But that's how they would get there. IAVA doesn't -- one of the things we do do is if somebody calls up says they have that issue, we have people like Cara who take -- fields that telephone call or that interview and directs them to that resource. The big problem is there is this huge amount of resources out there; it's just hard to get to. And that's what we're trying to do is kind of an aggregator, a way to bring people in and then put them to the people that can help them.

MS. HAMMER:

I was just going to say, I was hired for that purpose, to kind of field those inquiries and make those resources available. So if you have those resources that you can pass on, I would sure appreciate that to have kind of in my back pocket to pass along, so.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good.

MS. HAMMER:
Thanks.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Tom.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yeah, we talk about the availability of programs and services. And I'll back up just very briefly. To some extent the mental health issues and the PTSD are a factor, but we also need to factor in that never before in the history of our nation have we fought wars in quite the way that we are now. And by that I mean specifically we've never asked our war fighters to go back more than once. You went to World War II and you came home. You went to Korea and you came home. You went to Vietnam and you came home. And it was a rarity to see anybody go back for a second tour of duty. We've got folks on their fourth and fifth and, I imagine at this point probably in some cases their sixth deployments. And the impact of that on the families, while they're deployed and upon return is another area that has just been staggering. And we don't see or hear nearly enough about it. The awareness in my opinion does not exist.

I can tell you anecdotally a story that was told to me by somebody who visited an FOB in Iraq and had an opportunity to dine with a group of officers. And amongst the group was a young female JAG attorney. And this gentlemen engaged her in conversation and asked her *what does a JAG attorney do at FOB Warrior*, whatever the base might have been. And his expectation was that the response would be, *I advise commanders on rules of engagement or I advise commanders on the Geneva Conventions or on treatment of prisoners of war*. Things that would occur to you to be war related.

And she responded to him by saying that all she does day after day after day is family law. Nullifications of Powers of Attorney, separation agreements, custody agreements. And this, you know, we talk about the Civil Relief Act and the economic and the financial difficulties, when you got a soldier coming home from overseas who has been challenged by not only fighting a war, but worrying about the bills being paid and the house still being there when he gets home, to now worrying about whether his wife and, you know, his two adorable young children will be there as well. You know, there's so much of it. And this is one that's just really, really tough. It's not a sexy issue. It's not something that people want to see on the front page of the newspaper or necessarily hear much about. But the impact on the families is just off the charts.

And, you know, I appeal to this body. I don't know if it's a matter of maybe getting some media focus, whether -- I don't know what the answer is. I know that we counsel people to the extent that we are able through our offices, but this is an issue that as the years are rolling on, we're seeing more and more and more of. And it's just -- it's tragic. It really, really is. I don't have a solution. I'm presenting the issue for your awareness. But I certainly am at a loss for how to fix this problem. I don't know if you've experienced similar things if you've observed with the returning troops these types of problems, but, you

know, we certainly see it.

MR. GOMEZ:

Your point reminds me of -- kind of the emerging issue now that we're seeing is so the service members are affected by war, but we're -- so we've been very focused on that. Then there's the family. Because when you enlist a soldier, you're enlisting not just that person, but his entire family. And we have a website resource for that. It's called supportyourvet.org. And that's for family members only. It's kind of like a community for veterans, but family members can go on there and say -- talk to each other. People have experienced these same things because it is a small community that's dealing with this and say *hey, my son, my daughter, my husband, my sister is experiencing this and it's from their experience overseas. What do I do? Have you dealt with this?*

And there's thousands of people who have already dealt with these issues. And you can go on there and you can see there's discussion forums, they're all talking to each other and saying, *oh, I dealt with this back in 2004, this is what we did and this is what worked*. And that has been a good resource. And that's one of our new pushes at IAVA, is to kind of get the family more involved and use the family and get them connected to each other because they're really their best resource, the people that have actually experienced this already.

So that's what I would say we're doing. But you're right. It's a much bigger issue. And, it's -- I think, we're really at the beginning of seeing what this is doing.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Eddington.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Yeah, as you were talking, Tom, it came to me that, you know, I know the Army, Marines, and Air Force during Vietnam were gone nine months to a year. But then when I thought of the Navy, I mean, I was on three major deployments for six to nine months. I'm wondering did the Navy do something with the families in those days that maybe we could look into now. It mean, I never -- never thought about it, but they obviously were having family trauma, too, with being overseas and their families here and coming back for two weeks and then maybe or a month and redeployed. So, have we ever checked into anything like that?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well this -- I guess this is my opportunity today to make my politically incorrect statement. I think part of it was societally in the '60's and through some extent and it certainly changed, but societally it was not as acceptable for the family to separate. You know, it was expected that the family would remain a family unit. Not that there were not exceptions; there were certainly I'm sure many.

One of the things that we see that probably poses the greatest benefit, and it's a little bit more difficult for the active duty folks, but certainly here on the Island where we have Guard and Reserve units, they all have FRG's. They all have Family Readiness Groups. And these Family

Readiness Groups, the people who generally run the Family Readiness Groups are one of the wives, very often the wife of a senior officer or one of the commanders. And they almost to a person refer to themselves as the "den mothers". And they do a really exceptional job of keeping everybody in communication with another, of connecting, of consoling and counseling. And I think that hands-on ability because the Guard and Reserve folks frequently know one another because they've been drilling together and they've been a part of those units for years. So there's almost a familiar bond in these units that when -- you know, somebody thinks about packing up and leaving, she can go to another spouse within the Family Readiness group. They have that support.

I don't know how much online support there is in the active duty components. But even with that, it's a serious problem. It's certainly something that needs to be addressed at a level far beyond what it is being addressed at now because, you know, as is so often the case, we can talk about the right thing to do and the right time to do it. But, you know, there's also the other, you know, if you want to talk about it strictly business, the economic impact of all these families breaking up and people going onto Social Services and requiring potentially sheltering and all of the things that go along. The socio and the economic impact of it is a big negative. Not that that should be the driving force behind doing the right thing in this instance, but it's -- you know, there are a lot of considerations. And unfortunately again in my opinion it sounds like the soldier may share my view to some extent. It's not enough in the spotlight given the size of the issue. I hope that answers your question.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Anyone else? Anything else?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I'm sorry?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Anything else, Mr. Director?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I just ask us all to -- I unfortunately do have to leave, but I would ask that if at the conclusion of the committee if we could observe a moment of silence for Lance Corporal James Argentine, 22-year old Marine from Farmingdale that was killed on Thursday of last week. We are in the process of making the arrangements for the -- his body is presently at Dover Air Force Base. They are preparing his remains for return. We're expecting him to arrive at Long Island Islip MacArthur on either Wednesday or Thursday depending upon what's going on down at Dover. But, again, another young man -- I've spoken to several people today remarkably what a small world it is whose sons were classmates of this young man's at St. Anthony's High School. They were in his graduating class. And to a person -- everybody speaks very, very highly of him. But, again unfortunately another member of our community is coming home. Obviously when he does return home, we will, as we have with all of our lost, provide full honors. And that's all I

have.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Legislator Browning.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Thank you.

LEG. BROWNING:

Yeah, it's heartbreaking when you hear another one of our kids are coming home not the way we want that to happen.

You know, and it's funny you're talking about it because, you know, having been in the military and moving with my husband and we were stationed at Fort Carson, Colorado, Fort Rucker Alabama, and it's -- the culture is so different because it's like your military family. It's a time where it's all military people. And then you come to Long Island. And we didn't have an FRG when my husband was deployed. And I see the difference. And I do think that it's getting better, you know, my husband -- my son's National Guard unit, you know the 106th, they have a fantastic FRG and they get all the information out to all the soldiers and the families. And sometimes my son's like, she's calling you again, you know. You know, the sons don't the moms and dads to hear everything.

But things are changing. It's getting better. And, you know, we live on Long Island and the National Guard units, there's just -- that culture's not there like it is when you live in a, you know, in a duty station like in Fort Carson or somewhere like that.

But on a the separate note, I want to say thank you. I went to the Honor Flight to see -- oh my God, that was the most emotional, fantastic experience. I recommend everybody go. I went that morning. It was early in the morning. And there was about 30 World War II veterans that were leaving that day. I'm going back. I was able to help them out a little bit with some grant money. And I am going to go back and I'm going to volunteer and take the trip with them because I can't tell you how fantastic it was to sit there and talk to them all and tell about their stories. All of them talked about their experiences, how excited they were to be going. And, you know, just hearing all their stories of where they were and where they're living now. It was definitely -- it was very emotional, but a great experience.

So I want to say thank you. You came and you told us about it and encouraged us to go. I would encourage everybody to go. It was an experience and I'll never forget it. Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I thank you for attending and for joining them and for seeing for yourself. It's really not an experience that you can describe fully. You have to experience it to understand the depth of what the program is offering.

I can tell you we have four flights scheduled in the fall. We're hoping that we'll be able to fund all four flights. Right now that is not the case. They're always in need of assistance. One of the things I'll just say this

because I think you may have experienced it, every flight that has been scheduled, they have 30 to 35 veterans, World War II veterans. I think that there has not been exception to this; that once the veterans have been notified that they've been selected for a flight and the flight will be leaving, they've lost one. They've lost somebody who had gotten so far along in the process that he was called and told he was going to be on a flight and the World War II veteran did not survive to experience that.

So it really is important that we get these -- it's sad to say but we need to get them on these trips sooner than later. And as with everything else, it's always about the funding. But and I'll say this, just anecdotally, the gentleman who runs Honor Flight Long Island, Chris Cosich, a remarkably dedicated gentleman, he and his wife do this as a labor of love. There's no income. There's no salary. They don't earn a dime and they invest countless hours in it.

Chris actually will be missing the next Honor Flight. And the reason he'll be missing it is one of Suffolk County's very own is in fierce competition right now and will be going to the Mr. Universe competition. Anybody who's ever seen Chris can appreciate what I'm telling you. But we have a Suffolk County resident who is a, you know, an advocate through the veterans community who thinks he has a shot of Mr. Universe. So we'll keep you posted on that one.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Okay. Anybody else? All right. Director Romaine, thanks so much.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

As always.

INTRODUCTORY RESOLUTIONS

We'll take some votes. The two resolutions before us, Holly had spoken in support and had told us about them and the monies that we are to receive here. So we'll start with **IR 1676, Accepting and appropriating 90% reimbursable funds for the Senior Nutrition Program (County Exec. Levy)** I'll make a motion to approve.

LEG. BROWNING:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Legislator Browning. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? Motion carries. **APPROVED (VOTE: 5-0)**

IR 1677, Accepting and appropriating 90% reimbursable funds for the Senior Nutrition Program (County Exec. Levy) I'll make a motion to approve, second by Legislator Montano. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? Motion carries. **APPROVED (VOTE: 5-0)**

Anybody else? All right. Very good. All right, we are adjourned. Thank you.

Oh, yes. Yes, you know, before we adjourn, let us once again at the urging of Director Ronayne observe once again a moment of silence for Farmingdale native and St. Anthony's High School graduate, James Argentine killed in Afghanistan on August 6th.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

Thank you.

THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 2:24 PM

{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY