

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 15, 2010.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Leg. Steven H. Stern, Chairman
Leg. Jack Eddington, Vice Chair
Leg. Jon Cooper (excused absence)
Leg. Daniel P. Losquadro
Leg. Edward P. Romaine

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Benny Pernice, Budget Review Office
Laura Halloran, BRO
Barbara LoMoriello, Deputy Clerk
Christin Griskie, Golden Soldier Project
Andy Slianski, WEC
Brend Reiss, League of Women Voters
Linda Lessing, League of Women Voters
Ed Hennessy, Aide to County Executive
Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency
David Rivera, Management Technician, Veterans Services Agency
Greg Curran, Northport Veterans Administration, Homeless Programs Coordinator
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Leader
Linda Bay, Aide to Minority Leader
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
Michael Pitcher, Presiding Officer Aide
Dennis Brown, County Attorney's Office
Rick Brand, Newsday
And all other interested parties

VERBATIM MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:40 AM

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Good morning everybody and welcome to the Committee on Vets and Seniors. I'll ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Losquadro.

SALUTATION

I 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 freedom overseas in our thoughts and prayer.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

Thank you.

Good morning. We are joined today by a special group of students who are joining us today from the Candlewood Middle School in the Half Hollow Hills School District. So, welcome children. Welcome to those that are with them.

Before we start our Committee meeting this morning, I thought it might be a good idea to give our visitors some perspective, some geographic perspective on who's with us today sitting at the Legislature; so maybe, Legislator Eddington, maybe you could just introduce yourself and maybe share with the students today where you're from.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Good. Can you guys hear me? I was a high school social studies teacher for 14 year in Patchogue Medford. And I talked on government and a lot of students got interested and I think it eventually motivated me to run for office.

After that I was a social worker in the Patchogue Medford school district. I worked on problems. And I think what I have done is taken two things that I really liked and used them. And I can tell you in this job I probably use my social work skills more than anything else.

I represent Patchogue, Medford, Blue Point, East Patchogue, Coram -- a little bit of Coram, Gordon Heights, Holtsville, little bit of Farmingville. So I'm a little bit east of where you guys are. And I welcome you here today and hope you have a good time and hope you learn something.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Hi. I'm Ed Romaine, County Legislator. I represent the First District in Suffolk County. That district is all of the eastern end of Brookhaven Town from Center Moriches on the Bay to Shoreham on the Sound. I also represent the Town of Riverhead, Southold and Shelter Island, essentially all of the north fork and Shelter Island. It's a large district of the eastern legislative district. It's the largest in geographic size and probably at this point in population because we have had a lot of growth over the last few years. It's an interesting district. It's kind of the East End of Suffolk County. Most of the farming that goes on in the County goes on in the First Legislative District. So as you drive east you'll see a whole bunch of farms.

It's also an area where we are very -- we have a lot of people who are baymen and fishermen. And you see that with the fishing fleets in Greenport, which is at the very eastern end of my district. My district extends, as I say, all the way from Brookhaven out on the north fork out to Plum Island, if you have heard of that, and beyond to a group of islands, Great Gull, Little Gull, North Dumpling Island and Fishers Island which is four miles off the coast of Connecticut. So, thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Hi, I'm Legislator Dan Losquadro. I represent the district actually right next to Mr. Romaine, the Sixth Legislative District, and I think one of the things you'll see here that's interesting is we have representatives from a lot of different backgrounds. We have attorneys, we have teachers. Myself, I worked in the insurance industry for about ten years before I decided to run for office. And I think it's very interesting when people bring different experiences to government. I think that's what makes the representative system of government that we have work so well.

This Committee today is a Committee of great interest. We have a large aging population here in Suffolk County. I know I have probably six or eight retirement communities just in the district that I represent. And it's a little known fact we actually have the largest population of Vietnam veterans in the country in this County. So we have a lot of veterans. A lot of people who serve in the military live in Suffolk County. This is an important Committee. We look after the well being of those people. You'll get to see a little bit of that today so I hope you enjoy yourself and thank you for coming.

PRESENTATION

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Director Ronayne. And, Tom, maybe before you begin, maybe we can have everybody introduce themselves not just for the record, but also to make sure that everybody with us here today knows who everybody is and gets an idea of the different perspectives that they're going to be presenting.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

My name is Thomas Ronayne. I'm the Director of the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency.

MR. CURRAN:

My name is Greg Curran. I'm with the Department of Veterans Affairs with the Northport VA Medical Center and I'm the Medical Center Coordinator for Homeless Services.

MR. RIVERA:

Hi. My name is David Rivera. And I'm the new Program Coordinator for Veterans Services.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Welcome.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, Mr. Presiding Officer, if he's here and other guests. Thank you for the invitation to return and again appear before the Committee.

I think before I begin, we had been asked specifically today to provide a presentation relative to homelessness amongst our veterans population. But I think maybe before I go into the nuts and bolts of our presentation, it may be helpful to some in the audience to understand what it is that we're confronting and some of the contributory, some of the reasons why we have a problem such as homelessness amongst veterans that is so serious that it would rise to the level of being presented before our Legislature.

As we all know, we are a nation at war. We have a great many men and women, most of them younger, not all, serving in uniform in defense of our nation in all parts of the world, both here at home and abroad. Many of the service members who are serving in uniform right now are a little bit

different from what we would traditionally expect to see, certainly -- especially during a time of war. And that is that a very, very substantial number of our troops serving are actually National Guardsmen. The National Guard historically in this Country has been -- there used to be a saying, I know Legislator Eddington as a veteran would appreciate it, there used to be an expression when you referred to the National Guard during a time of war is, they were they guys in the rear with the gear. And it was the active troops would normally be prosecuting the war. And the National Guard when they were mobilized were essentially intended to protect the home front while our soldiers were deployed overseas fighting and to provide supplemental support in whatever capacity that might have been needed. Very often that was administrative maintenance, engineering, things of those types.

What we're seeing in these wars is the numbers of National Guard members who have been activated and mobilized and deployed. In terms of ratio or percentage of National Guard compared to active service is something we've never seen before. The American battle plan historically has been during time of war, we would have two thirds of our services serving as regular military, active duty and so forth. National guard would supplement and they would comprise about one quarter to one third of the force. We're operating at about the inverse of that right now, about 65 to 70 percent of the boots on the ground fighting are now National Guard.

The reason that that is significant is, National Guardsmen are what we all have referred to as citizen soldiers. A citizen soldier is your next door neighbor, the person, the family that owns the hardware store up in town, the guy who works in the nail department at Home Depot. These are folks who live amongst us, who work amongst us and are our friends and neighbors. It's a noble thing to sign on that line and agree that in time of need that you'll put on that uniform and go. It's never happened on the scale that it's happening now.

And what's happening is, if you have a regular army soldier, active duty full-time 24/7 soldier, there's a mindset, there's an indoctrination that occurs that you understand your daily function. Your daily role is that you wake up in the morning, you put on a uniform, you carry a weapon. And you understand what your day to day existence is about. You're in the military and you fill a certain role.

Well, if you take the young man who works in the mail department at Home Depot or if you take the fellow who owns the hardware store up in the village, and tonight he goes home, opens his mail and finds orders, he wakes up tomorrow morning, he's Corporal nobody or he's Lieutenant Jones and his world changes profoundly. He's no longer assisting customers or earning a living to pay his mortgage and maintain his responsibilities. He's wearing a uniform, carrying a weapon, which is -- it's contradictory to everything that he does in his day to day life. They're not as prepared initially to serve in the role of a combat soldier as our full-time service members.

The impact that we've been seeing is that the incidents of post traumatic stress disorder is considerable. It's larger early on than we saw after Vietnam or Korea or World War II. And we believe that's because of the psychological adjustments that need to take place that don't occur immediately. They occur over a period of time. As these National Guard people adjust to their new roles, they are being impacted. And one of the byproducts, and there are many, I won't for a moment suggest that this is the only one, but one of the byproducts is that upon returning home, the transition back into civilian or private life provides many, many challenges. And the adjustment is not always easy.

When you compound that transition to the psychological traumas that these people have experienced, those who manifest PTSD or Post Traumatic Stress Disorder are finding difficulties in many, many areas of their lives. One of them unfortunately is the ability to maintain housing. And that can be the byproduct of several other things. One of the big issues, and this is not a problem that is unique to our schools or our communities in Long Island, but it's a much larger problem is, there's a thing known as self-medicating where a veteran who suffers from a number of things post traumatic stress disorder being the prevalent one, many of these soldiers believe that by -- they

convince themselves that they can care for themselves better than a professional or a clinician. And they very, very frequently turn to self-medication, which is -- it's a nice way of saying drug or alcohol abuse.

When they begin substance abusing, the issue of maintaining gainful employment becomes an issue. When they are using the alcohol -- when they're abusing alcohol or drugs, they may find themselves in situations where they're encountering law enforcement, engaging in criminal activity or inappropriate activity. And these along with several others, at least, are contributing to the fact that our returning veterans are finding themselves in situations of homelessness depending upon which study you look at, some of us believe increasing numbers. And that is what we're here to address today.

You know, to simply open the discussion and say that we're here to speak about homelessness amongst veterans without giving the ground work for how does a service member go from being a viable hard working, loyal patriotic service member to that stereotypical homeless person that, you know, we all think of when we think of homelessness. We firmly believe, I not only as a veteran, but as the advocate for all of the veterans in Suffolk County -- and I'd like to add what Legislator Losquadro said a moment ago. Very significantly, and I'm very proud of this, by the VA's own statistics, we do not get to cook our own numbers on these issues, by the VA's own census, and you look this up on the internet, Suffolk County has the single largest population of any County with regard to population of veterans in the State of New York by a very significant number.

Now we know with this new census that this number will trim downward somewhat because we are losing our World War II and now our Korean War veterans, but when we woke up this morning, according to the VA census, Suffolk County has 119,918 veterans. That's a big number. That's a big number. When you factor that probably two thirds of those veterans are married people and two thirds of those married couples have the 2.3 nuclear children, certainly you're talking about a very large number of our Suffolk County residents being veterans or family members of veterans. So this not a minimal problem or an obscure problem that we don't need to take seriously. It is a big issue.

Nassau County has the second largest population of veterans in the State of New York. And if you were to combine Nassau and Suffolk, we are second only to the City of San Diego. Okay. So lot of folks out here are proud to have worn that uniform and we, I believe, have an obligation to ensure that they are being granted or given an opportunity to access and benefit from any and all services that they are entitled to, including our intervention in terms of their homelessness and accessing them to services and to needs, whether they be psychological treatment, medical treatment, housing or any other myriad of benefits that are available to the veterans.

Certainly we could not do this without our partners at the Department of Veterans Affairs. We over the years have established a wonderful working relationship specifically with Northport. We, in fact, partner with Northport. And when we engage in some of the programs that we have on line addressing the issue of homelessness amongst our veterans, VA actually partners with us. They go out with us. Mr. Curran's office provides a social worker to go in the field; go out with us into the field and actively search for this population. We work closely with our police department and sheriff for several reasons.

Largely once we decide on a community that we intend to outreach on, if we don't have information specific to an individual veteran that has a need, we go to the police. There's no better source of intelligence within a community as to where homeless populations exist, whether or not there may be individual veterans that are known to the police in that area. And that is important. But VA provides a social worker. And when I say go out in the field, I'm not talking about a couple of fellows in suits driving around, you know, looking for that stereotypical fellow pushing the cart with the bottles and cans. If I tell a staff member that we're doing outreach on a particular day, that's really code for jeans, work boots and a sweatshirt or tee shirt because we're in the woods, we're under the platforms in the stations of the LIRR, we're between the dumpsters, behind the supermarkets. We are any place that there may be a homeless individual.

Certainly we encounter many who are non-veterans and we certainly -- we certainly extend services and provide assistance to them in terms of getting what they may need but our focus is on the veterans out there in the community. And as -- it's a very bittersweet thing. I'm here and I don't know if I want to say I'm happy to tell you or that I am sad to tell you, but we do find these folks. We were out last week. And we encountered one veteran whose home had burned down. He essentially had become homeless, but he refused the home. No roof, no windows, no doors, very few walls; completely burned down. But the guy had cats. And he didn't want to leave his cats. So he stayed in the residence in those conditions. We make sure he's okay.

We were in the woods. We encountered a group. One person of that group happened to have been a Vietnam veteran. When asked how long he had been homeless, he didn't know. He had been on the street that long.

You know, one of the things that we encounter, and I should have said this earlier, in addition to the alcohol and substance abuse, the third greatest contributor to homelessness, we call them the big three, alcohol abuse, substance abuse, and serious mental illness. Certainly post traumatic stress disorder fits within the serious mental illness component as does now unfortunately a signature wound that we're finding of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars is TBI, or traumatic brain injury. You know, one of the byproducts of us having advanced technologically so far and having done so much in terms of improving our body armor and our armored vehicles and protecting our soldiers is that the core of the soldiers' bodies are well protected. They can withstand blasts. They can withstand small arms fire.

But what's happening is IED's, we used to call them mines, these things would have killed our soldiers not that many years ago. Now our soldiers are surviving these wounds or these experiences. But what's happening, we call it getting your bell rung; they actually have such a severe head trauma from the explosion, from the concussive forces of these explosions, that their brains move within the brain cavity and they experience what is known as a traumatic brain injury.

These injuries in many, many cases present symptomatically very, very similar to post traumatic stress disorder. They appear almost identically. Unfortunately when that misdiagnosis occurs and the TBI is diagnosed as PTSD, everything goes wrong because the symptomology is similar. The course of treatment is dramatically different. And we're only just now realizing that this is such an issue. And in the last year or two have been looking much more closely at all these PTSD diagnoses to make sure that they're not actually more serious brain injury type cases.

All of these things contribute obviously in some way to the homelessness. There are estimates, again, depending upon which report you choose to agree with, that on any given night in Nassau and Suffolk Counties combined, that we have between 2500 and 3500 homeless veterans. People scratch their heads and say, *well, how could that be? Where are they all hiding? Where are they? Where are they that we're not seeing them?* You are seeing them. Every time you go to a supermarket and you stop in at the bottle and can redemption room, you go to the train station and that fellow looks like he's waiting for a train, he's actually been living in that train station enclosure for weeks at a time. We find them living in 24 hour laundromats, in the heated areas in and around the 24 hour supermarkets. They're just everywhere.

We have a World War II veteran that recently past away; was living in his station wagon. The car had flat tires, no registration, no inspection, was not drivable. And it was parked on the grounds of one of those self storage centers. The owners of the self storage center had seen fit to agree to let him stay on their premise. And he was able to plug into the outlets on the walls at that center. And he had a little hot plant and he had a little toaster oven. The guy lived in a car. The guy lived in a car. World War II veteran, landed on Iwo Jima. He saw action in Saipan. This guy was a hero, living in a station wagon.

So, again, we have an obligation certainly in my agency as advocates for veterans, but I think

moreover not only as a government but certainly as a community. And the fact that we have these wonderful children with us here today hearing this information -- this is not -- this isn't sexy stuff. This isn't the stuff that you want to read about or see on television, but it's a reality. And, you know, at any given time you might be surprised that some of these folks, maybe they're not homeless any longer but you'd be surprised at some of the veterans who at some point in their lives been homeless. And unfortunately much of that homelessness is attributable to their military service.

So, you know, I offer to you that there is good working being done. We are partnering with the Department of Veteran Affairs. As I said, we have programs that have proven very successful over the last four or five years, one of which I know several of the Legislators have attended in the past, we host an annual homeless veteran stand down, which has been extremely successful. Each year it's increased in terms of the numbers of veterans who attend.

And just to give you an understanding of what a homeless veteran stand down is, in military parlance, a stand down is simply take a breather, come in off the front lines, have some respite, come to a safe or relatively safe area, get some sleep, relax and attend to the things that you need. Well, the stand down essentially what we do is we bring together between 35 and 40 various agencies. And they range from state, federal and local government, several appropriate not-for-profits. And we've even come now to do things that have nothing to do with providing services in the sense that we're discussing here, but we bring in haircutters. Last year we had three barbers cutting hair continuously. And, you know, little things like that, that the average homeless fellow's not going to have access to. We have everybody from the VA to our agency, Social Services, IRS, if you can believe it, Department of Labor, Unemployment representatives. And what happens is we provide a venue where any and all services that a person may potentially need or have need to access, we put everybody in one room at one time. It's one stop shopping.

Unfortunately, and it's just a -- it's a statement of fact, it's tough getting around in Suffolk County if you don't have a car. And if you've got a homeless veteran living in, let's say, Riverhead and he needs to be seen by the VA, he needs to receive services from my office, he needs to speak to the folks at DSS about whatever services he would be receiving from them, and he has no form of identification. Well, he can come in, he can see the VA, he can see us. He can see DSS. And he can get himself a non-driver ID card from DMV all at one time in one visit.

Unfortunately, human nature, if you have no means of transportation and you need multiple services, at a certain point you're going to throw your hands up and just stop doing it. You're not going to run around and wait in these offices and stand in these lobbies and spend hours and hours in line. Most people won't do it. We provide the opportunity for them to receive all of these services in one room at one time.

We also at the same event provide them access to showers. We provide them clean towels. We provide them access to a clothing pantry. We have a food pantry. We provide everybody who comes in a little duffle bag with a personal hygiene kit in there. And we have kits for both men and women as we do clothing. This is very important. This event we know for certain, we've taken some number of veterans off the street and gotten them housing, gotten them employment and made a difference in their lives. This is what we need to be doing on Long Island. This is what we're trying to do and, I think, with some success in Suffolk County.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, before you go on, I was with you for a good part of the event last year. My question to you would be how do we -- how do we quantify success? And, of course, you correctly point out that for some maybe just ensuring that they show up and have a good day and receive essential services on that particular day and then go back to their communities. For others it might be making sure that we stick with them for a year, for two years, for whatever it takes to make sure that they get the services that they need and maybe reenter the workforce, get the training that they need. But I would ask you and maybe Greg and David as well, you know, how -- before an event like the stand

down, certainly after, how do we quantify success and how do we improve upon it going forward?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I'm a big fan of lessons learned. You know, you always -- you always learn from the mistakes or the bugs from your previous event. I would quantify success with regard to serving our homeless veteran population very much as a missionary might have. He goes into a village with a hundred people and he helps one or if he saves one. We certainly do that on a routine basis, which I'm exceedingly proud of. I think that the work that my staff does on these issues everyday is really commendable. They are the best in the business. We do. We follow our veterans to the extent that we are able. Obviously this population is not always easy to remain in contact with. But we do have records of veterans, again, who have received housing, who have received other services, who have been become employed. And, you know, sometimes, and again, the big three: The alcohol, the substance abuse and the serious mental illness. Very often it's simply a matter of getting somebody to agree to go into a program, a treatment program and get some assistance. They very, very -- it's very powerful. A lot of these folks do get help. Not everybody is going to be successful unfortunately.

Another one that we find with our mentally ill population is sometimes it's simply a matter of the meds. They've been on and off meds. They're not doing their maintenance medications. You get them back on meds and you get stabilized, they're different people. They're different people. And, you know, they're reunited with families or they return to the workforce. So these are the things that we do see happening. But, again, it's bittersweet. Every year that we host our stand down, we see more and more and more veterans. And unfortunately I think given the realities of the economy that we are in today, we should expect that that will continue through this year at the stand down that we are presently preparing for. And that will be April 23rd. That's a Friday at the Brentwood Campus of the Suffolk County Community College.

We host, ironically enough, some people think that this is not the smartest thing in the world, but it's just works for us. And we have such a wonderful relationship, the Homeless Veterans Stand Down is actually held in the police academy building. You know, a lot of folks say these folks won't come in because it's not uncommon for homeless people to have had interaction with law enforcement. There may be warrants. There may be other problems. But it's sort of an amnesty day. We bring you in, we'll get you the help you need and then we'll worry about the other issues. And, again, we look forward to a successful stand down. We're hoping that we help a great many people again this year.

I will say, I'll say this, Mr. Chairman, only for the record, this is an event that even with the resources of my office and with the Office of the County Executive, we use between 200 and 250 volunteers from the community. This event doesn't happen without the volunteers. And they're not all veterans. These are folks from the community who have learned to love the event over the years and want to in some way contribute. Were it not for these people standing up and doing their small part, this event, events of this type don't happen. So the volunteerism is extraordinary.

The other program that we work with that really does directly impact homelessness amongst veterans is we have a very active, I'll go so far as to say aggressive incarcerated veteran outreach program. And incarcerated people, it's not uncommon for them to be discharged or released into homelessness, which is to say that they leave our jail, they're put in the van and they're taken to our Department of Social Services and they wind up in a shelter. We don't consider that appropriate housing for a veteran.

So what we do is, I've got certain members of my staff. And we even have a member of the VA team credentialed to enter the jails and work with our veteran population in the jails so that upon their release, we got a program in place for them. They don't get into that van and go to DSS and wind up in a Shelter. They go to the VA and they're seen or treated or whatever has to happen at the VA, they'll sit down with somebody from Greg's team and they'll work out what is -- what has become a very popular program known as the HUD-VASH voucher, which is simply a partnership

between the VA and Housing and Urban Development, HUD. It's essentially a section eight voucher for veterans to provide access to community housing versus going into a shelter environment. We have veterans specific housing programs within the community. The VASH, I think, is the ideal because it allows the independence that everybody wants. So that's important.

And, thirdly, the other big program that we run in this economy it's important is our annual veterans employment and job fair, which our first one two years ago, we saw 48 veterans. This year we saw in excess of 200. So, the programs are effective. The key is getting the word out there. The key is education and awareness. And, you know, that's what I consider my role to be, is to get the word out there, make sure these programs are available and hopefully pair them with the veterans who have that need. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you.

MR. CURRAN:

Thank you. Thank you for having me. I'd like to just talk a little about on the national level what the Department of Veterans Affairs, about a little over a year ago announced the five year plan to eliminate homelessness amongst veterans. We just entered into the second year of that plan and data was released just recently suggesting that homelessness amongst veterans has fallen 18 percent in the past year, which is a pretty impressive number given the, you know, the economy that we've all been experiencing.

One of the reasons that I think we can attribute, Tom touched on is the HUD-VASH figure. Starting in 2007 the number was 154,000 homeless veterans in this country on any given night. In 2008 it was cited as 131,000. And last year now they're saying at 107,000.

Nationally -- well, the five year plan is essentially an expansion of existing programs and a creation of new -- and a mandate for us to partner up with other federal, state, county and not-for-profit agencies to provide the most comprehensive plan we can to address the needs of these different populations that Tom touched on.

We have a pretty robust program at Northport. We have had -- for years we've had a shelter on the grounds for homeless veterans where they can walk in 24 hours a day, seven days a week and be admitted to that facility there. We've had transitional housing programs for male and female veterans with substance abuse issues where they can live up to two years while receiving treatment, receiving case management and then ultimately be integrated into the community.

Now, as Tom mentioned the HUD-VASH Program provides a third piece of that continuum of care which is permanent housing, which to your question earlier about following up and how do we -- how long do we follow these veterans, in the HUD-VASH program, that's a permanent housing program. And the way that works is we provide the supportive case management which is in essence hooking veterans up with needed treatment. HUD provides the vouchers for the housing. And when we and the veteran agree that they've reached a point of stability where we're no longer needed, we can request that that voucher be rolled over to a regular section eight voucher. We get our HUD-VASH voucher back and we start with a new veteran.

Northport received 35 of those vouchers in 2008. Last year we received 140. So now we have 175 of those vouchers and five social workers working in that program alone full time. In fact, when I came to Northport VA in 2002, it was myself and one other social worker who worked full-time with homeless veterans. We now have ten full-time social workers working out of Northport on homeless veterans specifically. We have partnered up with Tom's agency as well as many others. And we continue to do so. In fact, I'm looking now, the VA's announced just the beginning of this month some grant money to provide transitional housing. I've been reaching out to a lot of agencies here in Suffolk County.

Also, they're going to announce very shortly funding for what we consider short term emergency housing. And Mr. Romaine, you may be interested in this, we put a proposal in to establish a facility out in the Riverhead area so that we can better serve the veterans from that end of Long Island that historically have had problems accessing, you know, what we have in Northport. So we're hoping we can find a community partner who is willing to pursue that funding so that we can get something going out there.

We have also have a new initiative that we are just getting rolling which is the Veterans Justice Outreach Initiative where we're working to partner up with law enforcement and the judicial systems in both Nassau and Suffolk County. And essentially our goal is to create veterans courts where veterans who are involved in the criminal justice system for non-violent offenses basically due to either substance abuse or mental health issues can be offered the alternative of treatment through the VA and housing, if needed, as an alternative to incarceration so we're real excited about that. It ties into the homelessness prevention piece where we can catch people before they get into that system and before they become incarcerated. Tom mentioned we have our incarcerated outreach program that we partner up on together and do as well.

So it's a pretty comprehensive program we're running out of Northport. You know, I would like to put out my number for anybody who would like to -- is aware of a veteran who's either homeless or actually in danger of becoming homeless. That's another focus we're trying to get into now is catching people before they've become homeless and try to provide the services they need before that happens.

My number at Northport is 631-262-4400. And my extension is 2204. And please if anybody knows of an individual veteran or, you know, at risk of homelessness or homeless, please contact me.

LEG. ROMAINE:

What is the number?

MR. CURRAN:

Sure. That's 631-261-4400, extension 2204.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

If I can just piggyback onto something that Greg said, the program that they're hoping to bring into the Riverhead community touches on a very important issue and that is services and access to services for our East End veterans. And I don't want to get away from what we're here to discuss, but it is important to note that the -- the CBOC, the Community Based Outreach Clinic in Riverhead, has finally gotten underway. That work is being done and we expect a fall opening this year.

The transitional and the housing program dovetailing with the Community Based Outreach Clinic, we hope, is going to -- it'll be like light years in terms of the advancement of services to our East End veterans. And that is something that we -- I feel it's important to report on that and I didn't want it to not get said.

The other thing very quickly, and Greg made another excellent point, the services that we provide and the outreach that we extend is not necessarily only for the veteran. We have a responsibility -- our charge is to also provide services for not only the veteran but for their spouses, their dependents and their surviving spouses. So the population that we're serving is not limited strictly to the person who wore the uniform, you know, it's much larger than that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Mr. Rivera?

MR. RIVERA:

I didn't have anything particular to say but if anybody has a question about the stand down, I'd be happy to answer.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

What was the date?

MR. RIVERA:

It's April 23rd, ten to two. Ten AM to two PM.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And how is that going to be promoted?

MR. RIVERA:

Well, we -- like Tom said, there's a little over hundred volunteers. Had some meetings with -- the outreach committee meeting, had advertising committee meetings and we have lawn signs. We have -- we have fliers that are being distributed right now to laundromats and bus stations. Tom spoke to the head of the bus -- what's -- the Commissioner, I think, and they're putting -- every bus will have couple of posters on each bus. And churches will be contacted. I'm sure I'm forgetting some of them, but there's -- these guys are incredible, these volunteers. They're just -- for a lot of them, this is their fourth year they're doing this. And pretty much I was told when I started last month that it runs by itself with these volunteers and it really is true, they handle a lot of -- I'm just coordinating it but these guys are out there doing the work. And they go to -- one guy told me every time he puts a flier and he gives it to, like, a pizza shop, he tells them, you know, *hey, this is for vets, you have few bucks?* And he also collects money. So we're also raising clothes -- money for the volunteers for clothes as well.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I would ask that any information that you have you can share it with all of us, not just members of the Committee but all of the Legislators so that we can utilize our community resources to help you in your effort in getting the word out.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

We will have posters in today's mail to all of your offices. One other thing in terms of getting the word out, one of the line items in a Department of Labor grant that we -- my understanding is we were successful in securing again this year to offset the expenses of the stand down, we do have a line in the grant narrative for advertising. So as we get closer and we begin doing media advisories and press releases, we're hoping that we'll be getting the assistance that we would like from local entities with PSA's. Anywhere that we can't get that type of help, we do have a small budget for actual advertising that if we have to buy print ads and so forth that we can also do that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Great.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Thank you so much for being with us today and all of your great work. Barbara, there were no cards; correct?

MS. LOMORIELLO:

No cards.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. Thank you. We are going to -- for a few moments we are going to hear about a program the Golden Soldier Project and we're going to hear from Christine Griskie in just a moment. But before we do, we're going to go through setting up technically.

Let me also add for the record that Legislator Cooper will not be with us today. He has an excused absence.

And so while we're going through the technical set up, we'll go to the agenda.

TABLED RESOLUTIONS

Beginning with tabled resolution **IR-1175-2010: A Local Law expanding eligibility for County Real Property Tax Exemption to include Disabled Veterans (Co. Exec.)** I'll make a motion to approve.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Vice Chairman Eddington. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? The resolution is approved. **(VOTE: 4-0-0-1. LEG. COOPER NOT PRESENT)**

Madam Clerk, if I am not already, could you please list me as a consponsor. Everybody?

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Yes, please.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Everybody? Thank you.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Yes, thank you.

INTRODUCTORY RESOLUTION

IR 1219-2010, a Local Law to Increase the property tax exemption for Cold War Veterans (Romaine) Motion to approve by Legislator Romaine.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by Legislator Losquadro. Right, that is tabled for a public hearing. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? It's tabled for public hearing. **(VOTE: 4-0-0-1. LEG. COOPER NOT PRESENT)**

Okay? And that is our agenda with resolutions.

PRESENTATION

In the meantime, Chris, we'll have you come on up. Christin, before we say welcome I just want to ask everybody sitting out in the audience if you can see what's up on the screen. And if you cannot, maybe you could just come on up so that you can see and hear.

SLIDE SHOW PRESENTATION

MS. GRISKIE:

Thank you very much for taking the time to view that video. We live down in Florida. I would just like to introduce myself by saying my name is Christin Griski. I'm the Co-President with my husband, Richard Griski, of the Golden Soldier Project. We began the idea the first day of the Iraq war when I turned to my Christopher who's now a ninth grader, we turned to him, he was then in second grade, and I said to him, would you -- after hearing the news on the radio, I turned to him and said *would you like to make a book for the soldiers so we can make them feel better?*

At that point I just wanted to do my best to instill patriotism in my children. And at the time I was living in the Gross Point Michigan area. My family has -- we're living this economy. We've lived in Michigan, Florida, New York, California. And we find ourselves here. I did not know more than a year ago when I was living amongst a lot of Long Islanders that had left New York and went to Florida that I would find myself now in New York, one of the most patriotic states in this country, one of the most tenacious states in this country. And I'm just proud to be here serving among some of the best people in this nation, especially following the acts of 9/11. It's a complete miracle that I find myself here speaking before all of you. And I just appreciate, appreciate the opportunity.

Just to recap what the Golden Soldier Project is all about, it's a 501 (3) (c) organization. It was formally organized, initiated in Florida but we were able with the help of Steve Israel's office, to get it -- be made an official 501 (3) (c). I think I only have one more form to fill out for New York. It's been filed with the State of New York and I have one more form to fill out this week, you know, regarding having it be a New York charity.

What we're all about is, that number one, I'm just going to run down this list here, we recognize there's a time for war and there's a time for peace. We want to secure a bond between the United States military and United States civilians, especially the children. We are an on line publishing house. And our current production -- our current book that we're doing is entitled *The Golden Soldier's Rock*.

I love going to schools and working with the children, allowing the children to sign their first names only in the book, to reach out to the vets. Because when the vets receive the books, they're overwhelmed with the number of people that have put their name and effort and time into the books.

We've had global distribution through family and friends with our first three books going to veterans' hospitals as well as overseas and to vets of the past, present and future. And, like I said, before we began this book -- our first book -- this is fourth one that's currently in production. We began it the first year of the Iraq war. I also would be available to do veteran materials for vet groups if they need me to do that since a lot of this work is done on line and done through the computer.

I just wanted to share a few things with you. I received a letter in April 2007 that was sent to my son Joshua after we did our third book which was entitled *The Golden Soldier's Rock*. And I thought it would be very fitting for the kids today to hear this letter so that they know that they can make a difference when they reach out to veterans and just show them their best.

"Dear Josh, thank you very much for the autographed book you sent me in Afghanistan. It was a great book and I especially liked the pictures. You and I have many things in common. We both lived in Spring Borough, Ohio and we are both fans of Michigan State. I saw your Spartan's hat, your shirt and your book. I went to college at Michigan State from 1984 to 1990. I lived in Kings Hall where many athletes live. I did not play any sports there, though. In addition, we are both authors. You wrote your book *The Golden Soldiers Rest* and I am working on a book. I want to write about the life of an early military pilot Major General Benjamin D. Fellows. He went to fly for the Wright Brothers. It may take me a few more years to finish my book. You asked for a photo of

me but the only one I have here in the combat zone shows me flying in the back of an F16. This is a T Six Texan Trainer Jet. It is the first airplane that new lieutenant pilots in the Air Force learn to fly in. This is the airplane I usually fly in when I am back home in Lackland Airforce Base, Texas. We often do acrobatic flying, loops and rolls. One time last summer the clouds were tall like pillars in our practice flying area. We flew all around the clouds and it was great fun. Yesterday I was flying but I was in a cargo jet that transports people from one base to another. Halfway through the day we had a mechanical problem. We had to fly home and quit early. It was okay because I was pretty hungry by that time anyway. Thank you again for the book. It really brightened my week here in Afghanistan. Your friend." I'm going to leave his name anonymous.

We also on June 20th, 2007 my family received a letter from President George Bush that stated "thank you for the inscribed copy of your book the Golden Soldier Rest. I appreciate your kind gesture and thoughtfulness. Laura and I send our best wishes. May God bless you may God bless America. Sincerely, George W. Bush."

This photograph I'm going to hold up here (indicating) shows my uncle who was a Vietnam vet, Leonard {Laurety}. He passed away three years ago from hepatitis. And he was my main inspiration for writing the books. He sent the message that vets support vets. And I always told him, *But, Uncle Len, we're behind you also in the United States.* And I wanted -- I really started my books because I watched the negative emotional weight that he did carry from Vietnam and some of the substance abuse that he also had to endure. But he was, you know, he was definitely a family member.

My dad also served in the National Guard in the riots in Detroit in the 1960's when I was a baby. And this was a grateful appreciation certificate (indicating) that he received from the disabled veterans. So, yes, I do have military that were in my family.

This is a photograph of -- (indicating) I worked with children to create a picture of one of the girls that served at Camp Doha. We took a photograph that she sent back to us and we made art for our second book, the Golden Soldier's Victory. We wrote the Golden Soldier's Victory after the Golden Soldier's Comfort because at that time George Bush had started to maintain or started to state in the news that we were becoming victorious in Iraq and that we had victories to be proud of. At that time the statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down and that was a time in which we were creating that second book in Michigan.

This is one half of a page that highlighted a National Guard pilot in the Detroit Michigan area. And his son Devon signed the Sunshine Page. So our message is always to create positive feelings, positive emotions and feelings of veterans advocacy and support. And, you know, it's just been an overwhelmingly positive thing for, I think, both the veterans and the children as well as civilians that have had the opportunity to purchase our materials.

(Indicating) This is a photograph of my uncle. He died in World War II. My great uncle. He did not come home. His widow recently passed away but she remained a widow her entire life. And he also was from the Detroit area.

(Indicating) This is a picture of the first gallery of my son's book that we began on the Iraq War. I'm so proud of him. I looked at him and I said *would you draw me some army guys?* And he immediately walked right over to a table. He was home schooled that year alone and he began this work.

This is a picture from our second book and our third book (indicating). We call our projects the Golden Soldier Project instead of the Red, White and Blue Projects because the Latin name for a gold coin goes back to the Roman money sold there. So our US military are just as precious to us as our US dollar. A gold coin was called a {soldar} and that's why we call our project the Golden Soldier Project.

(Indicating) Here are some photographs also that were sent back from a gentleman that received our book overseas. And here's some wrapping paper that we sent books in during the holiday season (indicating). And then here's another group of him with his troops (indicating). And I have another set of gentlemen holding a book in front of their tent (indicating). This gentleman (indicating) is somebody that was in the hospital in Camp Doha. You see even though he's in the hospital, he's smiling and was definitely grateful for the support from back home.

The current book is going to, you know, have 32 pages and it's going to have US landmarks as well as veteran memorials in the book. And I just need everyone in this room if you can please get the word out about our website, please get the word out to the schools, to your friends, families. This is definitely a grass roots effort. And any help that anyone in this room can give, the more financial -- money that we raise, the more books get produced. I do this -- at this time I do this completely as a volunteer. And I just really mean this very sincerely that this has to come from -- the assistance needs to come from our politicians as well as from our children and anybody that is grateful to be a US civilian.

(Indicating) This is going to be the front cover of the next book. And I wanted to represent a Golden Soldier standing before a group of children. And I would like to have this page covered with hundreds of signatures which is why -- a first name only though, just to protect confidentiality. And that is why I go out to the schools or to the sporting events or what have you so I can reach a large number of people at one time.

I spoke at Ocean Avenue Elementary about a month ago. And during the question and answer session, one of the children said to me in Northport, he said to me, *why don't you have a picture of the Trade Towers in the book?* And I said *well, I really want this to be a positive and happy thing and I'm not sure what kind of emotion that would evoke.* And he said *well, I think a picture of the Trade Towers should be in your book.* And I said -- he was -- I believe he's a fourth grader. So I looked at all the kids. I had -- I don't know how many, I would say more than 60 kids in the room at the time. And I said, *okay, well, let's take a vote right now.* I said *if 90 percent of you guys vote that we're going to have the Trade Towers in the book, we will create a page for the book.* And, you know, they all -- you know, it was like 95 percent of the kids all raised their hands. I had a child from my church that I knew create this page. And there isn't one signature on it yet. I would invite everyone to put their first name on it as New Yorkers if you would like to do that. But this was a statement from the children in their opinion on what they wanted -- the message they wanted to send to our military.

(Indicating) This is going to be the back cover of the book. So this has been worked on by probably more than 30 people. And I have other pictures if anybody would like to see them. And I'd like to invite anybody to sign their first name only if they would like. And I also am open now for any questions or comments.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Anyone?

LEG. LOSQUADRO:
Thank you.

LEG. ROMAINE:
This very much sounds like a great enterprise. Whatever we can do to assist, please let us know through our Chairman Mr. Stern and we will try to find whatever help we can do or give you to make this a reality.

MS. GRISKIE:
Did you want me to comment on the current project; the numbers of the current protect? I don't think I did that.

LEG. ROMAINE:

I would like to talk to our Chairman. I'm sure he will bring that to us. Whatever we can do to help you, he will let us know.

MS. GRISKIE:

Okay. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

You have that information and we'll continue to discuss it. I will share it with members of the Committee and with all of the Legislature. Christin, thank you so much for being here. I'm sure all of us would agree -- thank you for your passion and your commitment to our veterans and their families. Of course continue to wish you every success.

MS. GRISKIE:

Thank you very much for the opportunities.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Anybody? Very good. All right. That concludes the business of the Committee today. I'll take a motion to adjourn.

LEG. LOSQUADRO:

Motion.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

By Legislator Losquadro, second by the Vice Chairman Eddington. And we are adjourned. Thank you.

**THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 12:49 PM
{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**