

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 April 19, 2010.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Leg. Steven H. Stern, Chairman
Leg. Jack Eddington, Vice Chair
Leg. Jon Cooper (not present)
Leg. Daniel P. Losquadro (not present)
Leg. Edward P. Romaine

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

William J. Lindsay, Presiding Officer
Robert Lipp, Deputy Director of Budget Review Office
Laura Halloran, BRO
Benny Pernice, BRO
George Nolan, Counsel to the Legislature
Sarah Simpson, Assistant Counsel
Ed Hennessy, Aide to County Executive
Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency
Juan Leon, Veterans Service Officer, Veterans Service Agency
Holly Rhodes-Teague, Director of Office for the Aging
Renee Ortiz, Chief Deputy Clerk
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Leader
Linda Bay, Aide to Minority Leader
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
Tina Block, Hands on Huntington
Rick Brand, Newsday
Dennis Brown, County Attorney's Office
Elizabeth Eddington, member SCSC Advisory Board
And all other interested parties

VERBATIM MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:48 PM

CHAIRMAN STERN:

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

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 prayers.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

Thank you. Welcome everybody and thank you for being here. We have a couple of people to hear from today. And I thank them for being with us.

What we're going to do first is, we are joined today by Tina Block. Tina is here with us on behalf of the Town of Huntington to talk about a unique and very important program Hands on Huntington, which as we have discussed in this Committee in the past is a naturally occurring retirement community, or a NORC. And it really is the first of its type in Suffolk County, one that we are very excited about and one that we always would like to learn more about to see what other communities throughout Suffolk County should be doing and what we at Suffolk County level of government can be doing to help.

So, Tina, thanks so much for being with us today.

MS. BLOCK:

Good morning. Thank you again for inviting me here and I'm very happy to be here to speak to the Committee today.

My name is Tina Block and I'm the Director of Hands on Huntington, which is a naturally occurring retirement community and neighborhood naturally occurring retirement community in the area of the Town, the Township of Huntington. And I'll get into more details.

Hands on Huntington is operated by FECS Health and Human Service System in collaboration with the Town of Huntington, North Shore-LIJ Health System, the Suffolk Y JCC and other partners. FECS is one of the country's largest not-for-profit human service organizations providing a broad network of behavioral health, education, employment, residential, family, youth and volunteer services reaching more than a 110,000 individuals each year across New York's metropolitan area and more than 25,000 individuals in Nassau and Suffolk County.

I'm here today to speak on behalf of FECS and the clients that we serve about Hands on Huntington, a NNORC SSP, a model of service delivery designed to meet the diverse needs of people who are aging in place. I'm sure you know that there's a population of individuals are aging on Long Island. And it's growing exponentially. There are literally hundreds of communities in which more than 40 percent of the residents are over the age of 60, New York State's criteria for designating a NORC. And this is criteria that's set by the New York State Legislature. To be eligible for funding by New York State you must have an area that has at least 40 percent of the individuals over the age of 60.

Since May of 2005 FECS has been working in partnership with local government and others to bring

Long Island a tailored version of what's been known for the last 20 year as NORC SSP. These programs started in -- mainly in the five boroughs of New York City, mainly in high rise apartments complexes, places like Co-Op City, areas in Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, where there are high concentrations of people aging in place. It wasn't until about 2005 that the New York State made dollars available for suburban and rural communities. And that's where we came in, in Nassau County first and now in Suffolk County.

The first NORC that FECS began was in Nassau County, its project Independence. And it's a partnership with the Town of North Hempstead. In March of 2007 we began a partnership with the Town of Huntington in a neighborhood that's primarily in Greenlawn/East Northport. The neighborhood was chosen because 43 percent of the households in this neighborhood have at least one individual who is 60 years or older. This is above the criteria that's required by New York State of 40 percent.

In addition to the Town of Huntington we partnered with North Shore-LIJ Health System, the Suffolk Y JCC and other human service providers, local civic and community groups, merchants, houses of worship and others.

Our most important partners have been the residents themselves who are involved in governance, priority setting, volunteerism and more. Seniors participate on an Advisory Board, our Newsletter Committee and our Fundraising Committee. These are all volunteer positions. They don't have to be appointed or invited to attend. They just show up and they become part of our committee. We've served more than 250 seniors with individual home-based needs assessment. Case management, health care screenings and monitoring this provided by a social worker and a registered nurse.

Initial needs assessment one on one with the senior in their home includes a home safety assessment to identify potential hazards in the senior's home and offer solutions. Initial assessments also include a financial review for entitlements, community service information, real estate tax review for home owners, evaluation for volunteer services, completion of health care proxy and File of Life, an evaluation for ongoing social work or nursing services.

Several hundred others have also been reached with educational, social recreation, volunteer programming, health screenings, vaccines, information referral and more. In addition to the services that are provided to seniors that reside in the Hands on Huntington catchment area, we've also provided information referral to more than 200 individuals that live in the surrounding communities. So if someone calls us for information, we provide it. We mail out packets. And this would include information that's available to people regardless of what community they live in in Suffolk County. For our individual in-home assessments, they must live in our catchment area. And this is a requirement and limitation that's set upon us by the funding source New York State Office of the Aging. So we have a particular -- we're in a census tract in Greenlawn/East Northport.

Hands on Huntington also coordinates monthly health and education programs at the Harborfields Library in Greenlawn and the Town Senior Center in Huntington. Free blood pressure screenings are provided for half an hour before all education programs. And all education programs are open to anyone in the public. We have people coming all the way from out east to some of our programs. We've had people from Nassau County come to some of our programs. They're are open to anyone.

In 2009 Hands on Huntington provided a free flu vaccine to 90 seniors who came to the library. We held our flu vaccine at the Harborfields Library this year for the second time. And that's the first time this has been offered at a library setting. In addition the NORC nurse administered the flu vaccines to homebound seniors who could not come to the library for their vaccine. She went and made a home visit and administered the vaccine. Free screens for kidney disease and memory impairment were provided to 50 seniors. And this month we're offering free osteoporosis screenings at the Harborfields Library.

To provide these services in the community, we partnered with North Shore-LIJ, the Dolan Health Center as well as St. John University School of Pharmacology and other private and medical practitioners and professionals in the community.

Some of the health education programs have included the healing power of laughter, resources for caregivers, elder law, aging gracefully, managing diabetes, nutrition for seniors, managing your medications, how to talk to your adult children and exercise to improve your balance. And, again, these are just examples of some of the programs that we have done in the past year. And every month it's a different topic. The topics very often come to us from our senior Advisory Board. So when we sit around the table with our seniors and they say *we need information on a topic*, we research it, we find a speaker, we develop a program based on their needs.

Social recreation programs have included free musical performances and annual New Year celebration and a free donor sponsored trips to Broadway. Last year we took 50 seniors, 25 from the Huntington NORC and 25 from our New Hyde Park NORC to see a show on Broadway. We saw *Momma Mia*. It cost them nothing. It was totally supported by donations that FEGS was able to raise for us that were earmarked specifically for senior trips. And we're planning our next trip in June to go see *Promises, Promises*. And we'll be taking another group of 50 seniors to that program.

In addition to these events and programs, shuttle bus services also provided to many of the recreation programs that we cosponsor with the Suffolk Y, they coordinate a small mini school bus that will pick people up at their homes and take them to the program. And in addition to the bus we also provide to NORC participants who are financially limited, we give them bus vouchers for the HART bus system.

Hands on Huntington has also reached out to younger members of the community to break down barriers and stereotypes between the generations. Projects have included an intergenerational program at the Harborfields High School in Greenlawn using art to explore stereotypes. We brought in a facilitator. We met with the Art Honors Society at the High School and we brought in a group of 30 seniors. And we had a wonderful three-hour work shop with the high school kids and the seniors, an amazing interaction between the two groups.

A partnership with the Boyd Intermediate School in the Elwood School District has just begun this year. And through this project we've brought seniors into the school for special programs. They invite our seniors to their International Day in the fourth grade where the children make all these presentations about their backgrounds and countries of origin and the families make food. And so the seniors came to join that program. They invited us to their spring and winter concerts. And we're exploring with the school opportunities for seniors to volunteer in the school. And what we're trying to do is match seniors with teachers based on their expertise. So if a teacher is teaching about citizenship and we have a senior who's gone through that process, the senior can go and talk to the class. If the class is studying about World War II, then we would have a World War II veteran come and speak to the class. So we're exploring that right now and developing that program.

In addition to these programs at schools, we've also had -- we had an intergenerational theatre project with the Suffolk Y JCC Theatre Camp last summer. And we've also developed friendly visiting opportunities for parent child pairs. For instance we have a woman who volunteers with her 12-year-old daughter. And they've been matched with a woman who's 92 who's homebound. And the mother/daughter pair go and visit this woman on a weekly basis.

We have another pair, a woman and her 17-year-old twin boys who've gone and been partnered with two elderly sisters. And they've helped them do things like just move their winter clothes out of the closets and bring the spring things up from the basement and things like that.

We are also in the process right now of jointly sponsoring a spring cleanup and garden planting program that will be on May 2nd. And this is a partnership with the Suffolk Y JCC and their Unity in

the Community Program. They'll be bringing a group of teens to the NORC area to plant flowers for seniors in their homes.

Hands on Huntington volunteers have provided in 2009 169 individual visits and telephone calls of reassurance to homebound seniors as well as the delivery of holiday food baskets to many of these seniors. And these are pairs that sometimes we have a couple of volunteers who have been volunteering for us for over two years, visiting the same person on a weekly or every other week basis. And wonderful friendships have developed out of this. These volunteers run errands for the senior as well as doing the friendly supportive visits.

Funding for these projects to date has come from the Township, New York State legislative funding and a foundation, and the bulk of support coming from grants that FECS has been able to secure with the New York State Office of Aging. Because of the current economic crisis, the NORC programs across the state have lost eight percent of NORC funding in the last two years. During this period grant opportunities from private foundations has also decreased. New York State has not made any new dollars available for NORC development since 2007.

While there is no one panacea to address the emerging needs and interest of this population, we must begin to plan a variety of responses. Long Island Suburban Landscape creates a very compelling case for the development of programs like these. There's a significant isolation for individuals living in single family homes, often without relatives in close proximity or the available time to assist.

There are additional barriers to accessing care, particularly accessible transportation or the severe lack of. Even though we have a wonderful Suffolk County assisted transport system, and in the Town of Huntington we have the Huntington accessible transport system HART bus, there are still many seniors and disabled individuals who can't access these programs because they can't get out of their house by themselves or they can't get down their long driveway alone. And those are requirements for these transportation programs.

What we're doing within the NORC to address this issue is we're exploring the use of volunteer drivers. And so we're in the process right now of exploring whether we could have volunteers go and pick people up for medical appointments so they can help the individual get out the house, get into the car and then also assist them at the appointment.

Maintenance of property and homes is another difficulty. Homes which typically becomes -- it becomes more difficult and more challenging as individuals age and become more frail. And NORC programs are very cost effective way -- are cost effective. Its participants are able to stay in their homes longer with ongoing maintenance of health and mental health issues provided within their community; and, therefore, the goal of keeping people in their communities out of more expensive levels of care, such as nursing homes and private assisted livings.

More than 15 NORC SSP's across New York State have demonstrated success. FECS with its partners are just beginning to see the impact of these programs on Long Island. We strongly believe that the need for a response such as this one is growing as exponentially as the population of aging adults, particularly those aging at home. We hope that at some point to gain support from the Counties and other sources to help secure and grow these programs.

Thank you very much for your time.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Questions? Thanks for being with us today. Sure, Legislator Romaine.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Just a quick question, Ms. Block. You indicated that you would appreciate getting the support of the County for this. How would that -- what are you envisioning?

MS. BLOCK:

Of course, like any not-for-profit we're always looking for financial support because that certainly can allow us to expand our programs. And also, you know, we continually search for grant opportunities, private foundations and so forth especially since we are not just experiencing this eight percent cut over the last years, but anticipating that New York State Office of the Aging will probably cut us more. Of course we all know that the state budget has not yet gotten worked out. So we'll have to see how that plays out for us. But funding clearly is an issue.

In addition to that we are very much working with not just the Township but also Suffolk County Office of the Aging. And that is a wonderful partnership. And so I think that from the County level --

LEG. ROMAINE:

You're working under a contract to provide specific services?

MS. BLOCK:

(Shaking head yes)

LEG. ROMAINE:

Okay.

MS. BLOCK:

Yes. What we do in Suffolk County Office of the Aging is very often we do joint referrals. If Suffolk County Office of the Aging workers identify a senior who need services that are outside of their purview, then they can make referrals to us if they live in the area. And likewise if we have people in our area that are not taking advantage of Suffolk County Office of the Aging services, then we can connect them. We do a lot of connecting with people so that's very helpful.

One of the County programs that is in great demand, that we find is in great demand, is for EIHAP services, the Elderly In Home Assistance Program. We find large numbers of people that are in dire need of this program and so that would be, you know, I think, one area of need. If there was a way to expand that so that more people's needs can be met, that would be wonderful.

LEG. ROMAINE:

What you're saying is, I think, regardless of the person's geographic location or religious affiliation or anything of that, you provide the service and would be willing to expand it and there's a tremendous need for it?

MS. BLOCK:

The only part there that's not accurate is geographic.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Right.

MS. BLOCK:

Because we're -- because we're funded by New York State Office of the Aging --

LEG. ROMAINE:

Yes.

MS. BLOCK:

-- we're limited to the geographic area that has been approved for the grant that we operate under.

LEG. ROMAINE:

And that is just Huntington.

MS. BLOCK:

It is a census track. If you look at the red and white flyer that I handed out --

LEG. ROMAINE:

Right. But is that a census track just in the Town of Huntington?

MS. BLOCK:

Right now, yes, it's a census track in the Town of Huntington.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Because I know you have an office in Center Moriches.

MS. BLOCK:

That's not -- yes, FECS has programs in Center Moriches but it's not associated with this particular NORC.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Right.

MS. BLOCK:

What happens with the NORC is that we had to identify a neighborhood that was at least 40 percent over the age of 60. And that was presented to New York State of the Aging.

LEG. ROMAINE:

And the only census track you could find was in Huntington?

MS. BLOCK:

No, there are many census tracks.

LEG. ROMAINE:

I know that for a fact because, for example, Shelter Island and Southold have some of the most aged population in Suffolk County in terms of average age. Probably if you looked at the census tracks in those two towns, you would find large aged population, many of whom are not being served and need in-home services.

MS. BLOCK:

And this is why on a state level -- I think everyone needs to encourage our state representatives to increase NORC funding. Because if they increase NORC funding on a state level, more grants will be available for agencies like ours so that we can then set up other NORC's in Suffolk County. So our goal at FECS --

LEG. ROMAINE:

Excuse me. You're the only agency that is providing this service in the County?

MS. BLOCK:

We're the only agency that was approved in Suffolk County. Suffolk County only has one approved NORC from the New York State Office of the Aging.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Really.

MS. BLOCK:

Yeah. And when you mention Shelter Island, it's very interesting because a year-and-a-half ago we were asked to speak to the Directors of Senior Citizens Services across Suffolk County.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Right.

MS. BLOCK:

It was a meeting that was coordinated and we actually -- Shelter Island folks were there. And what they shared with us is they're starting up very NORC-like services within Shelter Island that's being done through their senior unit. There also a lot of --

LEG. ROMAINE:

I know we were hoping to have a public health nurse there at least part of the time. And in fact there was commitment but it's a commitment that was quickly forgotten by the executive branch. And our public health nurse is not there and they don't get the type of services that sometimes they need because there are people that are on limited means that live on Shelter Island who are elderly who could benefit from that and particularly from the type of services that your agency provides. Please feel free to give my office a call. I'm District One. My office is in Riverhead. But I represent Shelter Island, Southold, Riverhead and all of eastern Brookhaven. Please give my office a call. We'll see what we can do to get our state representatives educated as to that need and certainly encourage our seniors to seek that type of state funding because it could definitely be a benefit in my district, which I believe in terms of median age, is the oldest of the 18.

MS. BLOCK:

There exists a map of Nassau and Suffolk County where they've done a demographic study and identified how many potential NORC communities. And there are literally hundreds. I mean this map is just covered with red dots in Nassau and Suffolk, literally hundreds of communities.

LEG. ROMAINE:

When you mention a census track, is there an economic component connected to it?

MS. BLOCK:

No.

LEG. ROMAINE:

No? Okay.

MS. BLOCK:

The guide line for the NORC is that we -- you know, clearly we want to be able to provide to people who can't buy these services on their own.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Right.

MS. BLOCK:

The goal is to provide to low and middle income individuals who can't purchase these services privately. So they are focussing -- NORC census tracks are focussed more on low to middle income. And what I would say is my experience and from what I've seen in our area is the majority of the people that we see are widows, living alone, on Social Security.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Right.

MS. BLOCK:

And their Social Security may be anywhere as low as \$700 a month to maybe 15 if they're lucky. And you can't live on that and pay your real estate taxes and your bills and your, you know, all those kinds of things. So we do a lot of financial planning assistance with people. We also do a lot

of assistance with real estate. Do they have all the real estate tax reductions that people are entitled to? You know, those kinds of things, too.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Thank you, again.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

In fact, it's the exact purpose of having Ms. Block join us today, was to get this kind of a dialogue going, Legislator Romaine, because the Hands on Huntington Program, as we said when we started the discussion today, is unique. That it literally is the first in Suffolk County. And so the idea here today is to hear about all the good work that's going on. I remember when we first started to talk about the NORC in Huntington, it was a brand new pilot program. And now we're a couple of years in. And so the idea was to hear about, you know, everything that's been accomplished and how it can be emulated in other parts of the County, taking the best practices that now after a couple of years, you know, we should all be able to look at and see what might work in other areas throughout the County.

Tina, do you have any idea as to -- by the numbers or percentage of those residents that live in the catchment area, how many are home bound; do we know that?

MS. BLOCK:

I don't have a percentage on it. The difficulty that we have is that very often there are people who are isolated and I would say unknown. They're not reaching out to us for services. And if a neighbor -- sometimes we'll get a call from the neighbor who says, *you know, I have this neighbor and she's 93 years old and her house is a wreck and her mail -- you know, she can't get to her mailbox*, or whatever it is. So sometimes we identify people that way.

But the difficulty is that very often they're not self-identifying. And so if they're not approaching us, what we're trying to do to identify more of these isolated people is to reach out to local houses of worship. So we've been meeting with the -- in our area there are a number of churches, and also a synagogue. And we've been reaching out to the clergy because very often they may have contact with these people. And our goal is for the clergy then to be able to help us bring this information to the senior so that then they will be not afraid to reach out. But there is a fear factor and that does make it difficult sometimes.

The other thing that we've done is that we share information with the home delivery meal programs, with the assisted transport programs, with the home repair programs, things that are happening within the town; so that way if their staff become aware of somebody, sometimes I can get a call from Town of Huntington Home Repair from a gentleman who was there to fix the toilet and saw that there were other issues within the house and then they can call us. So I don't have a number for you to answer your question, but it is a very difficult number to achieve or to identify.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

But as you suggest, when you have someone in the home to provide other services, it's really all hands on deck and so there's great communication then between all the disciplines to determine whether or not someone needs other kind of services.

MS. BLOCK:

Absolutely.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

That's great.

MS. BLOCK:

Absolutely.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

When somebody is working with the program, they call, they sign up, they become part of the program, how do they then access services? Is there one person associated with the program, like a case worker who helps coordinate everything? Or do they just call a number? Do they get a different person on the line every time? Once they're in the system, how do they best go about utilizing the services?

MS. BLOCK:

Well, because the grant is so small, we're a two person operation. I'm the Director of the program. I'm also the social worker for the program. And then I have my nurse partner is a nurse provided to us through North Shore-LIJ Health System. So they're a subcontract in the grant. And we have a nurse 14 hours a week through North Shore LIJ. So it's one nurse who's assigned to the program consistently and myself. So when they call, they get one of us, or they get our voice mail unfortunately if we're out in the field. But they get one of us. So then they're reaching the person they're ultimately going to meet. And then what we're doing is when we take those calls, it's either to determine whether is this something that we're going to handle one on one or is it something that needs to be referred out to somebody else? But each person who calls us gets a call back either from myself or from the nurse.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

One of the things I always found most attractive is that unlike other senior communities, new or old, where it is a 55, you know, over community and they're behind the gate and there's a private clubhouse, this is the exact opposite. These are seniors who are already living in their homes. It's a community that by its nature is already part of our wider community when you talk about interdisciplinary, when you talk about utilizing volunteerism, when you talk about going out to the schools, particularly the elementary schools and there are several schools in the area, the catchment area. When they have the opportunity to work with people who are part of this catchment area, it's really working with their neighbors. They're not going to another community that's kind of been walled off from the rest of us. It is the people who they live right next door to. And I've always found that that is really one of the most attractive parts of this type of -- of an effort.

You had mentioned -- which elementary school? Which schools are working with the program right now?

MS. BLOCK:

Right now the school that we're working with, the Harborfields High School, which is on Pulaski Road, which is one of the border streets of the NORC area. And then the other school interestingly enough that approached us, and the way it happened was one of the parents who's on the PTA lives in our area and gets our little postcards every month and contacted us saying -- and she's at the Boyd Intermediate School. It's a third, fourth and fifth grade school in the Elwood School District. And it's on -- it's on Cuba Hill Road just a little bit south of the NORC area. So they're just a little bit out of the area. But a lot of the children who go to that school live in the NORC area. And it was very interesting, like I said, it was a parent who was getting our mailings and approached us and brought us in to meet with a group, a working group that combines the staff of the school teachers and parents. And so it's got a lot of potential there. It's very interesting.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And that's what I thought you had mentioned. And so for me it was interesting to see that there's the Harborfields High School but then the Boyd School which are two separate school districts. And sure, the more children and their parents and PTA's and administrators that you can touch and bring into the fold, obviously the better. That's great.

MS. BLOCK:

Absolutely. The NORC area actually encompasses two school districts -- well, actually three school districts. It's mainly Harborfields and Elwood. But there's also a small portion, the East Northport

School District in our eastern portion; there's a small area there. So it's also three different school districts, three different zip codes. I mean it's divided in a whole bunch different ways, but, yes. There's also an elementary school that's part of the Harborfields School District that is right on Pulasky Road as well. We haven't done anything with them to date, but, again, there's always possibilities.

And one of the things that you touched on before is that this is not just a program serving the seniors, but one of the over all goals of the NORC is to make the community more liveable. So it's a community building program. So, yes, we're doing case management. Yes, we're doing health care management for seniors. But we're also trying to connect people up in their community at all levels, at all age groups to make the community more liveable so people want to stay there.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I certainly wish you and the program continued success. And please let us know along the way anything we can do to be of assistance. And, yeah, as time goes on, I'm sure we would all like to see in one form or another, you know, our neighbors communities throughout Suffolk County, take a look at the good work that's being done through the program and see what might be applied to their communities as well as we go forward. Thank you so much.

MS. BLOCK:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

I just wanted to comment on the NORC's. They are a great program that when the State put out the RFP's for applications five years ago, four years ago, they only did a handful. So we would love to see more of those within Suffolk County because I really do believe that providing more intensive services in the communities where people are retiring and, again, the north fork certainly has 29 percent population over the age of 60. And they did put in an application at the time but, you know, they didn't receive it at the time. But, you know, there's a great need for those types of programs. And they are great partners to us. I mean the NORC's -- the aging network --

LEG. ROMAINE,

Mr. Chairman, could I just ask a quick question? Could you get me that application or information about that application?

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

Kara McLaughlin in the Town of Southold was the one who actually wrote it along with another organization.

LEG. ROMAINE:

Okay. I know Karen. Right. So I'll speak with her then. Thank you.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

So they have it. Oh, you want to talk to her? Okay. Because otherwise I can mention to her that you're looking for it.

LEG. ROMAINE:

That's okay.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

Okay. Yeah, the NORC's is just another type of service that would be really needed in the County if we could ever get it, if the State does more funding, which obviously this isn't the time to ask for that. Just, you know, but it's another great program.

I just want to let you know that potentially the HEAP program may be closing about May 15th. So if you have seniors in your community who haven't applied who are, you know, who are eligible, please let them know that they should get their applications in.

And the other thing I'd like to share with you is legislation that was passed by the governor, signed by the governor; and it's the Family Health Care Decisions Act. It goes into effect in June. And it's for those people who -- for people who have not done any type of advanced directives. Even though we tell people they should do advanced directives they said approximately 20 percent of people do. So this legislation puts it in orderly fashion those people who can make decisions for somebody who's incapacitated.

So as information comes out, we will try to get it out to the Legislators. And if you could share it with the community, we'd love to have you do so because it really is important. There's an awful lot of people out there who don't do the advanced directives. And if they're never going to do them, at least there will be some way to orderly make decisions for them. So we'd like that word out there if you can help us with that. But as soon as we get the information, the State's working on publicity packets for us, so we will share that as soon as we get it. But it's an important piece of legislation that was passed.

The luncheon is May 13th. The picnic is August 4th. You should have received invitations to the luncheon. Anybody have questions for me on anything?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly, thanks.

Tom?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Presiding Officer, members. Thank you again for the invitation to appear before you.

I don't have a great deal to report on other than the hand-out that I hope has been distributed. And really what I wanted to discuss quickly was a report that was just released and reported on by the Army Times. Given that it was released through the Army Times, I would imagine that there's some credibility to it.

And really what was striking about this report was that the percentages or the numbers of unemployment amongst veterans is dramatically higher than we had previously been aware. There are a number of factors that are contributing to this. But in paragraph two you'll see that unemployment for veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan is at about 15 percent, which is significantly above that of the general public. But even more disturbing, if you go on and read that the unemployment rate for all veterans whether they were Iraq or Afghanistan or not under the age of 25 is at 30 percent. That's a striking, striking number.

And the thought is that there are several contributors. Probably the largest contributor is the impact that these multiple deployments are having on our troops. And the numbers of our troops who are returning home with some degree of mental or physical disability. Getting them back into the workforce obviously is going to present its own challenges. But when you think of a population, an age group 25 and below of people who have probably worn the uniform and served, to be at 30 percent is -- it's terrifying to me. I don't know where these folks go beyond their present situation to get back into the workforce. Certainly through veteran service organizations, certainly through the Department of Veterans Affairs, services are being delivered. But just wanted you to be aware that these numbers are as high as they are. And hopefully you'll be able to go back to your own districts and share with your Chambers of Commerce and your local merchants of the importance of not just employing but seeking out and employing our veterans, just how important that is to our

communities.

I also would like to remind you that this week on Friday from ten o'clock to two PM at the Suffolk Community College Compass in the Police Academy Building we will be hosting our annual Homeless Veterans Stand Down. I would encourage all of you -- if any of you have not attended one in the past, take a moment and pass through the event and see just what goes on there. It's quite impressive. And it really sends a message when you see a room with literally what we have seen in the past and we expect to see again, hundreds of homeless veterans, you know, for a County where most people deny the existence of a homelessness problem to begin with; to be able to put hundreds of homeless veterans in one room at one time sends a strong message.

I'd like, if I could, just to go back for a moment and touch on the presentation that was made on the NORC's. The population, it was stated that many of these aging in place residents are widows. This age group lends itself strongly to a high percentage of veterans during those years. And many of these widows or veterans, if they happen to be veterans, are -- certainly the home bound ones, there are benefits and entitlements that are available to them beyond their social security, beyond their pensions. They may be eligible for aid and attendants, they may be eligible for DIC pension, survivors pensions. So please be aware that if there is a veteran connection, whether it's a survivor, a spouse or the veteran himself, please contact us and hopefully we'll be able to provide additional benefits and additional services.

That's really all that I have to report onto today. I did, Mr. Chairman, as I had spoken to your office about, I've invited Juan Leon to attend -- pardon me -- to join us today. Juan is our newly hired Veterans Service officer. I thought it would be a good opportunity for him to meet the Committee and for the Committee to know who our newest service officer is.

Juan has been working out wonderfully in the office. The thing that most excites me about Juan's presence is not only his eagerness to learn and to work in the agency, but the fact that he is himself a veteran of Afghanistan. He is the recipient of the Combat Infantryman Badge, member of the Fighting 69th. And I just think that his having been in Afghanistan as a member of OIF/OEF allows a -- there's a peer appeal for our younger veterans coming into the office who largely are not excited about sitting with somebody who at a minimum we are old enough to be their fathers; in some cases we're old enough to be their grandfathers. The fact that they can come in and they can communicate with a peer about their experiences and pursuit of benefits, I think, is a tremendously powerful tool and a resource for Suffolk County.

So with that I've asked Juan to maybe just share with you for a moment or two his, in the first person his experiences on -- his military experience and his transitioning from military life back into civilian life. Juan?

MR. LEON:

Okay, it's my first time here. Thank you for having me. Good afternoon members of the Suffolk County legislature. Thank you for allowing me to speak here today. My name is Juan Leon. And I'm the newest addition of the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency.

I served for six years -- six-and-a-half years in the New York Army National Guard Fighting 69th in the Bay Shore unit. I was deployed to Afghanistan in 2008 and returned in 2009. And, yes, I am the recipient of the CIB, which is award for engaging in ground combat. And I'm now an example of the new generation of veterans in Suffolk County.

First and foremost I consider myself to be extremely fortunate to be employed in these tough economic times. Employment continues to be a pressing issue for many of my friends that I have deployed with. Other issues that veterans face when they come home are adjustment issues, relationship issues, substance abuse issues, post traumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression. In some cases these underlying ailments that veterans have after returning from the combat zone cause them to have run-in's with the law. And I personally believe that these cases should be given

special consideration.

In my role as a Veterans Service Officer for Suffolk County, I am assisting veterans from all eras and their families with basically any issues they might have; whether it's assistance with filing a claim for a disability, pension, or a burial or helping the veteran and their family obtain benefits that they never knew that they were entitled to.

If you asked anyone in the Fighting 69th that knows me, they would tell you that I was the go-to-guy as far as benefits and programs for veterans, especially in education, since I took advantage of both the Montgomery GI bill, chapter 1606 and the new post 9/11 GI bill, chapter 33. And I am currently still using the post 9/11 GI bill to put the finishing touches on my degree.

Again, I consider myself extremely fortunate to be employed, especially in an agency such as Suffolk County Veterans Services, who I feel I can truly put some of my talents and good use to benefit our service men and women that have served in the country.

And with this being said, if you have no questions or concerns of me, it's been an honor meeting all of you today. And I thank you for your time.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you for being here. Thank you for your service, your passion, your commitment to our veterans, our entire community. It's great to have with us today and great to have you as a part of our Suffolk County government team so thank you.

I have a question for you. I remember the last time Lieutenant Delli-Pizzi from the Fighting 69th, was with us. And I had asked the Lieutenant the question, you know, what can or should we be doing here at the county level of government, really at any local level of government to assist our veterans and their families who have just returned, was it accessing benefits, was it health care, other kinds of support services?

And the Lieutenant said to us, all of us, the first, second and third priorities are jobs, jobs and jobs. And I've always remembered that. So it's been encouraging to see in so many of our, you know, community-based organizations and chambers of commerce and local bar associations, all doing what they can in providing some type of a support structure for our veterans and for the families.

My question to you would be in your experience what do our veterans know about, what don't they yet know about? How can we all do a better job of getting the word out about a lot of these services that are being offered? How can we ensure that they take advantage particularly during difficult economic times? That we are all doing a better job to get the word out and making sure that they're utilizing the services that are available.

MR. LEON:

All right. It's actually interesting you would mention that just because recently I've gotten permission from my boss, Mr. Tom Ronayne, to talk to my old unit, which I'm very close to, which was Bay Shore, I'm actually particularly close with the Huntington unit also because I was there for a little bit. And basically where I would come in, maybe on the weekend when they have a weekend drill and speak to the soldiers that did deploy and let them know that we are a service agency that is here to help them. And not only that, but to also inform the new recruits that are new, when they go overseas, and when they come back, if they do, that the service agency is here to help them and support them. So, you know, basically I think the most important thing is getting the word out because there so many veterans out there that are -- veterans and family spouses, children that really don't know to the full extent what they are entitled to.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Certainly anything we can do through our offices, you know, we're always available to assist.

You know, I'm looking, Tom, at this article from the Army Times that you had distributed. You know, you talked about what was in the second, the third paragraphs. What's distressing to me is what is in the fourth paragraph, which is -- the quote here is that veterans were in the past slightly more likely to have been employed in the past but now the situation has actually been reversed. And the trend is that they are now less likely. And that is troubling.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

It's true. Statistically veterans have always been unemployed in slightly lower numbers than the general population. Again, the only factor that is not in common with previous wars and conflicts are these multiple deployments. We truly believe in the business, so to speak, we truly believe that the impact of these multiple deployments are having, it's not just time away from home or time away from your civilian job, families are disintegrating, careers are being lost, jobs are evaporating. And the opportunities for these folks to address any of these issues are minimized because every time you're deployed again, the cycle begins all over.

So, again, it is distressing. Never before since people have been tracking this have veterans been unemployed in numbers -- percentages greater than the population at large. But we have trended there and that's where we now find ourselves. Hopefully in the years to come we will better identify what the impact of these multiple deployments are and come up with ways of better addressing their end result.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Eddington.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Yeah, Tom, you know, you talk about today as opposed to, you know, maybe in our day with the Vietnam War. I mean I'm looking at the problem is because we're using reserve and National Guard units that are in and out. I went on three deployments over four years in the navy, nine month cruises. But I new I was gone for four years. My family new it, my wife and baby new it was going to be nine months before I came back for the next deployment. I think it's the inappropriate use -- if you're going to sign -- maybe we should be signing up people for three years or four years. Because I mean if I was a boss, if you're in the Guard for a few years, I know you're going to go three. I mean I have friends that have gone three or four times. So you know if you're in for four or five years, you just can't have any roots. So I mean, is there anything in our government that's looking to boost full-time military enrollments?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Not that I'm aware of. I couldn't agree with you more, Jack. The American battle plan for ever has generally been, and I've said this here before, has generally been about 66 percent active forces to one third Guard and reserve. And what would typically happen, and we use Vietnam as a prime example, the regular guys, the grunts, the army regulars, the marine corps regulars, those were the guys who went. They were the war fighters. They were the boots on the ground. The National Guard and the reserve, there used to be a term that was -- a term of endearment, the Guard and reserve were generally the guys in the rear with the gear. They were the support services. They would be activated but they would remain home to defend the homeland. They would be the guys responding to the hurricane Katrina's or to the earthquakes or the natural disasters.

If they did deploy typically they were support and admin personnel. They were motor pool guys who maintained the vehicles. They were the admin man guys, the payroll guys. We're operating at about the inverse of that now. The guys on the ground over there right now are about two third National Guard and reserve. And one of the impacts, and you touched on this when you said you knew you were going away. You would be gone nine months and that could happen over and over again for four years. That was your mentality. You woke up every morning knowing that you were going to put a uniform on, you were going to pick up a weapon, you were going to go to work. And that was your job. That's what you did everyday. And you understood that.

These citizen soldiers, these National Guardsmen who are being activated time and time and time again generally have a different mentality. If you're the guy who owns the bagel shop up in town or the hardware store or you work at Loews, whatever it might be, you're a private practice attorney, you go to bed at night as a private practice attorney, you open tomorrow's mail and suddenly you're in uniform. Your practice is turned on its head. Your family is caught off guard not knowing exactly what they're going to do while you're deployed. And, again, it all comes back to the multiple deployments. But, yeah, the need for an expansion of our full-time regular forces, I think, is enormous. I just don't know that it's going to be happening any time soon.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

I'm just, you know, thinking out loud as we're talking about this problem, doesn't it sound like that government on all levels should step in to provide some kind of, I guess, part-time employment or something for soldiers that are going to be in this three, four, five year cycle?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That would be ideal. Even if they were only temporary or part-time jobs, at least there would be jobs. Unfortunately the climate right now is that nobody's being hired.

That touches a little bit on something you said a moment ago. If you're an employer and I come to you and as a part of our interview I disclose that I am a member of the National Guard, you as an employer, and this is unlawful and it shouldn't happen, but human nature being what it is, your self-preservation in terms of your business kicks in. And the first thing that comes to your mind is *why would I hire Mr. A compared to Mr. B when Mr. B is not likely to be activated and taken away from his job a number of times?* The USERRA protection applies for that soldier for up to five years.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

You know, yesterday I was in an event and I had a person that owns a pool company and a person that owns a lawn company saying *I can't get any young Americans for these jobs for four or five months.* Well, you're talking about lots of young Americans that are coming back that can't seem to find jobs. I mean maybe we should hook them up with, you know, businesses out in Southampton that hire in the summer. You know what I mean? Rather than wait for them to find it, maybe we should be able to find companies that say, *well, look, I'm looking for 40 people for the summer.*

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Any time you have somebody knocking on your door saying they need young Americans to put to work, give them my phone number, please? We have them. We have them and they're standing by; they're ready, willing and able.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Okay, I will.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Thank you.

TABLED RESOLUTION

Okay. We have an item on the agenda today. It is **IR 1219-2010, a Local Law to Increase the property tax exemption for Cold War Veterans (Romaine)**

LEG. ROMAINE:

I make a motion to move it.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Motion by Legislator Romaine, second by Legislator Eddington. On the motion maybe, Robert, you can just give us a brief explanation.

MR. LIPP:

There aren't good data to do a strong estimate of this sort of stuff, but we were pretty creative. I think we got a ballpark-ish number. Part of the problem is that the exemptions are based upon assessed valuation. And what happened is it's a 15 percent exemption broad strokes and they're raising the assessment limits so that you could -- from 12,000 -- actually -- what is it? 12,000 to 54,000. The problem is in order to make these state laws work, they have to equalize the value of property, assessed values, so it's really based on full equalized value of property. To make a long story short, the current proposal instead of the 15 percent exemption averages based upon our estimates 2.7 percent countywide. So that, in other words, you're above the limit so you don't get the full 15 percent exemption. On average you get 2.7 percent; you being the veteran.

Here the proposed exemption, which would increase the limits, would bring probably the average up to based upon our estimates 12.2 percent. So they're doing a lot better. They're going from 2.7 percent exemption to a 12.2 exemption even though it says 15 percent. Clearly some people with low assessed values will get the full 15 percent. It's the ones that own homes that have higher property values won't get that full exemption.

The other issue relates to how many veterans are out there. What we did is we looked at the number of veterans that out there, what percentage are Cold War veterans, which we sized at a little every 60 percent, but it's just an estimate. And then we looked at, well, what percent are homeowners. And we used probably a relatively low number but in the ballpark 75 percent. So to make a long story short, we got information from the department, total number of veterans projected for 2010 about 85,000. Of that 60 percent are probably Cold War by looking at the periods that people were in. And then times 75 percent, there's over 38,000 potential opportunities for veterans here. Is that a good number? Hard to say, but that's our estimate.

On average we think the savings to these Cold War veterans would be about \$95 per homeowner. And the cost to non-Cold War veteran property owners would be less than seven dollars. \$6.76 we estimated.

So whenever you have an exemption, there's going to be -- the rest of the property owners are going to have to make up the difference. And those are the estimates we came up with.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And just to be clear, these are -- this is a new classification that we were, I guess, enabled to enact under New York State Law. New York State Property Tax Exemption Law for our veterans, the definitions were expanded to include Cold War veterans. And so this is our opportunity to expand our definition as provided under state law.

MR. LIPP:

Yes. And it's also recognition that -- it says values are -- the maximum cutoff is kind of on the low side, so the state is allowing us to raise those to a more reasonable number. At the end of the day on average you're still not going to get -- you, the Cold War veteran, you're still not going to get the full 15 percent on average. Some will but it brings a more reasonable number for that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And the definition provides that these are -- this exemption would be extended to eligible Cold War Veterans, I just want to be clear, who are not currently receiving eligible funds or alternative veterans' exemptions. So am I reading that correctly? That this would be an opportunity to receive

a property tax exemption only for those who are not receiving some other type of veterans related exemption?

MR. LIPP:

If they're getting something that's greater, they won't get the addition; otherwise they will. It won't replace a greater benefit.

MS. HALLORAN:

Right, if they fall under a different category, then they wouldn't fall underneath this category.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Eddington.

LEG. EDDINGTON:

Yeah, I just want to add, and I heard the term add and expand. And I'd like to put on the record that it's correcting an injustice to veterans who have served our country when they were called, so.

LEG. ROMAINE:

My only request is to Budget Review, that information that you gathered if you would forward that to my office. So hopefully when this passes, we can let more people know about it. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And I agree with Legislator Eddington. I want to make it clear this is not a cumulative type of a benefit. This is a benefit that if one is already not receiving some type of benefit now will be able to receive a benefit. And I think what we're suggesting here is that it provides to Cold War veterans during -- those that served our country during that tumultuous time with parity, with others that came before and after; isn't that true?

MR. LIPP:

Yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Any other comments? Okay. There is a motion and a second for IR 1219. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? The motion is approved. **(VOTE: 3-0-0-2. LEGISLATORS LOSQUADRO AND COOPER NOT PRESENT)**

Let me just state for the record, I did get a call, and Legislator Cooper, a member of our Committee, has an excused absence. He was not with us today. He has an excused absence. Okay. That is all. Thank you very much.

**THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 12:50 PM
{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**