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 May 26, 2011.

MEMBERS PRESENT:
Leg. Steven H. Stern, Chairman
Leg. Sarah Anker, Vice Chair
Leg. Vivian Viloria-Fisher
Leg. Edward P. Romaine
Leg. Lou D'Amaro

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:
Tim Laube, Clerk of the Legislature
Laura Halloran, Budget Review Office
Benny Pernice, Budget Review Office
Eric A. Kopp, County Executive's Office
Thomas Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency
Holly Rhodes-Teague, Director of Office for the Aging
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Leader
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
Justin Littell, Aide to Leg. D'Amaro
Catherine Stark, Aide to Leg. Schneiderman
Dot Kerrigan, AME 3rd Vice President
Joseph Lapietra, Long Island State Veterans Home, Deputy Executive Director
Jonathan Spier, Long Island State Veterans Home, Director of Community Relations
Katie McGowan, HorseAbility
Mitch Beller, HorseAbility
And all other interested parties

VERBATIM MINUTES TAKEN BY:
Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:07 AM

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 D'Amaro.

SALUTATION

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 OBSERVED

Thank you.

Welcome everybody. Thank you for being here today. First we'll ask Director Ronayne to come on up.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members. Thank you again for the invitation to join you today. As always it is a pleasure to be here.

I have a fairly brief report. And certainly, as always, I'm available to answer any questions or respond to any inquiries that any of you may have.

To start off, I'd like to just, sort of depart from my prepared remarks a little bit and mention that this morning when I got up, when I was getting ready for work, we had the television on, we were flipping through channels. And at six o'clock this morning a program came on on HBO that I would encourage each of you when you go home this evening, if you can On Demand it, whatever you have to do to find it, the name of the program or the documentary, I suppose, is A Live Date. And what it is is they follow ten veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, who have sustained either serious physical or psychological injuries. And they follow them home, they interview them, they meet with their families. And it really provides an extraordinary insight into not only the sacrifices that these service members have endured, but also the impacts on their families. They visit with the spouses and the parents and the children of. And the dynamics are just remarkable.

We have several female veterans, women veterans in there who happen to have been combat wounded, amputees, their experiences and their -- you know, their challenges are certainly unique. But, you know, these folks are our neighbors, they're our friends, they're our coworkers. And so often we just pass them during every day life and don't realize who they are. And the fact of the matter is we have a great many of them right here in our community. And I think that -- I told my wife, who's a school teacher, that this should be required watching. Everybody should have to watch this thing. Some of it is a little bit graphic and some of it is a little bit difficult, but it really provides a perspective that, I think, is very special and worthwhile. So that being said --

LEG. D'AMARO:
What was the name of that again?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
A Live Date.

LEG. D'AMARO:

You know, you talk about getting perspective, I happen to be reading a book right now called Unbroken. I don't know if you've heard about this. It is just --

LEG. ROMAINE:
So am I, Lou.

LEG. D'AMARO:
Are you reading it? Yeah, it's impossible to put this book down. And you talk about --

LEG. ROMAINE:
I got to the point where he got married.

LEG. D'AMARO:
Yeah, I didn't get that far. I'm halfway through.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
You just gave away --

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
Okay, Book Club Time, Oprah.

LAUGHTER

LEG. D'AMARO:
Although I did hear that he is still alive, he's 93-years-old; still with us, which is great. But you talk about, you know, whether you get it from television or from a book, the impact of examples of sacrifice made by the men and women in the armed forces -- this book happens to be about World War II. And what this person went through, the sacrifice made in his life, you know, so that we can all be sitting here today basically and, you know, continuing on with our democratic process is just mind-boggling. You can't put this book down so I would recommend that to you as well. You might want to take a look at that.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
I'll pick it up this evening.

LEG. ROMAINE:
Surviving in an open raft.

LEG. D'AMARO:
Forty-seven days in a raft with the pilot when they were shot down in a B 24, I believe, it was.

LEG. ROMAINE:
Yes.

LEG. D'AMARO:
With no food, no water, having to make do. They were -- finally spotted a ship when they spotted land. They were drifting west in the South Pacific towards the Marshall Islands into enemy territory. And the ship that picked them up was a Japanese cruiser. And then they became POW's after that. And what they endured is, I don't see how any human being could not be broken by what they endured. It's just an amazing tale, true story, to read.

And, you know, it's funny, I happen to speak to a veterans group last night. And I brought it up. And I said, you know, I never, of course, served in a war or the armed forces. I was fortunate

enough to have not done that. My father was a Sergeant in the Korean War. But, you know, it's important for people to watch these documentaries and read these books so they understand the sacrifice. And when you go to these events and you hear people say *we should never forget the sacrifice,* it's really true. You have to really -- I would highly recommend this book to anybody. Right, Ed? It's just an amazing story.

LEG. ROMAINE:
Fabulous book. The author is --

LEG. D'AMARO:
Hillibrand is the author's name.

LEG. ROMAINE:
It's the same author as -- Hillenbrand -- Laura Hillenbrand is the same author as Seabiscuit.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
She's such a great writer.

LEG. ROMAINE:
Great book.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
In contrast to that book, the story of A Live Date, most of them are in their teens and early twenty's. I don't know that there was anybody older than the age of 30. And it's a very powerful, powerful thing to watch.

The other thing is, as you mentioned about the experience with the Marshall Islands and so forth, I think Steve new the gentleman, we recently lost a true American hero who was member of the Huntington VFW by the name of Arnie Bocksel. Arnie was a guest of the Emperor for about four years. He was one of the few remaining survivors of the Bataan Death March. And Arnie also wrote a book. It's a short book; it's a quick read. But it really -- it's very well done. And the name of that book is Rice, Men and Barbed Wire. Again, the stories, you can read them over and over and over again and you just can't possibly put yourself inside that experience.

LEG. D'AMARO:
Yeah, it's really -- it's amazing. And when you look at the -- one of the contrasts in reading a book that I'm reading is that, you know, today there is -- the technology, it's much more advanced for fighting men and women, the protections; not that it makes it any easier. But the guys back in World War II, flying in these airplanes, there was all new technology. And even things like the life raft that was deployed when the plane went down, it happened to go down early in the war, like I think it was 1941 -- '42, after Pearl Harbor, and they didn't even provision the rafts the right way. Of course, by the end of the war they realized they needed so much more for men to have a chance to survive. But when they went down, not even the life raft had the provisions let alone the technology in the airplanes. You know, it's really something.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Things have evolved remarkably. In fact, that's been a discussion. And I know my friends here from the Long Island State Veterans Home can share on this, I think, the survivability of the wounds that our soldiers or our service members are seeing today, more than 50% of the wounds that they're surviving today on the battlefield, would not have been survivable as recently as Vietnam. So it just -- it's extraordinary but --

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
I'm sorry. We'll let you get started in a minute. It seems that we've become emersed. I was just at a talk, an author who wrote a book, I think it's called the Trillion Dollar War --

LEG. D'AMARO:
Oh, I read it.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
About the cost of the -- and in her discussion with us, because it was a women's forum, she spoke to the fact that women who are active members of the military have, I think, four to six week's leave after they have the baby. But they can be deployed after four months. And I think we have to think about that and think about what kind of support services we can have for those women and their children; because you can have a four-month-old baby whose mom is deployed for over a year. And that's an important bonding time.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
The average deployment right now is between 15 and 18 months.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
And all of us who have children know that imprinting time, how critical that learning time is. And I happened to be sitting with a Brigadier General, a woman who's a Brigadier General. And I asked her for her view of this. And she said, *well, you know, when you sign up, you sign up knowing that you're going to be deployed.* And she didn't have as sympathic a view of that mom. But whether we assign decision making or whatever else you assign to what it is, what I'm concerned about is the children who -- you know, you have to make provisions when you sign up, that you have provisions when you have a child.

But I think we have to maybe get numbers from you. If you know about women who live in Suffolk County who are being deployed who have youngsters -- I know that Tutor Time had had a program. In fact, Kathy Liguori, who's a member of my Welfare to Work commission -- our Welfare to Work Commission, her Tutor Time did have special rates or some kind of provisions for children of military families, you know, of somebody -- of a family member who had been deployed. But I think kids with -- very often these are single mom's, and they're going off for a year-and-a-half with a new born baby left behind. That baby's going to need extra support. So I would just -- if you could check that out and see how often that's occurring in Suffolk County.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
I'll see if I can research those numbers. I will say to you that I don't entirely disagree with the General. That being said, one of the things -- and, you know, child care and children and family are certainly highest on that list. But, you know, whether it's a financial issue or a family issue or so many other, you know, employment upon return home from deployment, when we send our soldiers overseas and put them in harm's way, we need the whole soldier. And if we take a new mother, and very often our female service members are married to other service members, so it's not uncommon for both of them to be deployed. And the family or the child care arrangements fall on grandparents or siblings or other extended family members.

So your point is well taken. And the child care issue is extremely important. But from the soldier's perspective, we're not sending a whole soldier to war. There are psychological and there are emotional challenges that that individual faces that don't necessarily allow you to be in the moment when you need to be. And that can be very dangerous, not only for the Soldier but for other members of that unit and the extended mission. So it's a much larger issue than the child; but the child is certainly at the core of it. I'll research those numbers for you.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Not entirely unrelated to this, is a recent change on the part of the Pentagon concerning service members who have been wounded or injured engaging in enemy. And this is becoming a very controversial issue. Because we've had so many of what we call closed head wounds, the traumatic

brain injury, the PTSD and so forth. But specifically to the traumatic brain injury, the TBI's, the Pentagon has now revised the criteria for the awarding of the Purple Heart Medal.

And there used to be certain things that related to TBI where certain service members who experienced TBI would have been eligible for the Purple Heart Medal had there been several criteria met. Some of those being that they must have lost consciousness as a result of their injury primarily from improvised explosive devices. So loss of consciousness must have occurred. They must have been unfit for duty or required medical care that took them off the line for a minimum of 48 hours. And they must have obviously required the care of a medical professional; or in the instance of absence, that medical professional, had one been available.

They've essentially removed those restrictions. And soldiers who are victims of TBI without having lost consciousness and without having been taken off the line will now be eligible for the award of a Purple Heart Medal. There are just somewhere under 25,000 new soldiers who fall into this category. And this, again, is going to be another controversial issue because the Purple Heart has always represented what most of us think of is a Purple Heart, which is a battle wound. And the TBI's are fairly new in these two wars that we're prosecuting now because of the improvised explosive devices and the nature of the wounds that they're incurring. So where this goes, I'm not sure. But it wouldn't surprise me if at some point into your individual offices service members or family members brought this issue to you. So if you want more information on the specific details, I can provide those. But this is something that you'll likely hear about as time goes on.

I should have started with this, but please allow me once again to extend an invitation. And I think Mr. Romaine will be ahead of me on this. On June 3rd at 11 AM in Riverhead at the County Center Office Building, we will be having the formal ribbon cutting with the Department of Veterans Affairs. We had a soft opening for the VA Clinic. This will be the formal ribbon cutting and the public opening of the facility. It's up and running now, but they wanted to operate there for a number of weeks and work the bugs out and make sure their IT things were in place and that their staffing was appropriate and so forth.

So if any of you are able, we'd love to see you on June 3rd next week at 11 AM at the County Center Building. At the new entrance in the rear of the building, you'll be able to see, there'll be a tent. The VA has their signage on the building now. They promise us, the VA, a very worthwhile event. And this is literally a once in a generation event for us in Suffolk County in the veterans community. This has been such a long time coming. It's so long overdue. It's just that important. This will change the face of veteran services on the East End of Long Island forever. So hopefully we'll see you there.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Tom, if I may, since they have had their soft opening, how have things been going?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Very well. Obviously the two vital components are the VA and the staffing and their ability to provide services as needed for the veterans who they are seeing.

The other part of it, and there was always a concern as to how long it would take to work out the logistics of it, but it seems to be working quite well, is the Transportation Program. Transportation has never been available for veterans on the East End. And now with the help of the Disabled American Veterans, they are providing van transportation and they're offering door-to-door service. They will pick you up at your home and bring you to the facility. After your appointment, they will return you back to your home on both forks, which, you know, again is an extraordinary leap forward in the nature and access to services available to our East End veterans. So between the VA and the DAV, so far everything seems to have been working out very well.

We also are beginning to see an uptick in the number of clients that we're seeing in our offices, which we have relocated from the west end of the building to the east end of the building where the

clinic is. We share a common wall. So veterans have the ability when they're visiting the clinic to simply walk through one door and visit our Suffolk County Veteran Service Agency, which every additional client we see, to me, is a win.

Obviously we're going into Memorial Day Weekend. I know all of you have busy schedules. There are a great many events scheduled over this upcoming weekend. We will do our best to cover as many of them as we are able. Unfortunately even the Newsday list, I think at this point there's six pages of parades and fairs and events of different types. So, you know, we will be out there in numbers doing the best that we can to cover the events and make sure that our agency is represented and people know that we're available to provide services as we always do.

We have been meeting with the VA on a couple of issues. Obviously our partnership with VA continues to grow stronger with regard to our outreach and working with them on various programs. That continues to grow stronger and stronger under the new leadership of Director Phil Moschitta at Northport, who has a very aggressive approach toward provision of veteran services. He definitely is somebody who, I think, we all describe as thinking outside the box, but in a very positive way. So we're very happy that that has continued to evolve.

One of the things that has come out of that recently, and I'd like to plug one of our jurists, if I might for a moment, the Veterans Treatment Court in Islip has been up and running for a while now. It meets on Tuesdays. And Judge Toomey has been exceptional. Judge Toomey has been running the Court. But he has the unique perspective of also having been a Vietnam veteran. He was an enlisted Marine, I believe -- No, he was Army, but he served on the ground at Vietnam so he has an appreciation for some of the issues and challenges that the veterans who appear before him bring. His commitment and his willingness to become involved in the Veterans Treatment Court, I think, was commendable in the first place.

But last week -- I hope he doesn't have any objection to my repeating this, but last week on Monday my office also administers an incarcerated veterans outreach program where I've got certain individuals on my staff who are credentialed to enter the jails and we meet face to face with the inmates who are veterans to establish paths towards services and treatment, potentially alternatives to incarceration working with Probation. We meet with these veteran inmates on a regular basis. And we're able to in many instances find ways of helping their situation improve.

Obviously with the Veterans Treatment Court, it's one more tool to further that effort. But as a sitting judge he certainly had no responsibility or obligation to do this. But last Monday night Judge Toomey took it upon himself to go to the jail in Riverhead with my people and actually sat down in a group with the incarcerated veterans and engaged them in a discussion, which I thought was really exceptional. You don't hear much out there in terms of that level of commitment. So my compliments to him. My hat is off to his obvious commitment to this program. And we look forward to its continued success.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Good.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Again, concerning Northport VA, we have this year, later this year on October 28th, 29th and 30th, Northport has a -- and it's unique for a VA medical center facility, has been able to secure the Traveling Vietnam Wall, which we've had several times over the last several years in Suffolk County and on Long Island, which in and of itself was unusual. Northport will have it on the campus at Northport October 28, 29 and 30th. They have approached us to assist them in prosecuting what will be the first ever homeless or veterans in need of assistance Stand Down at Northport given the successes that we've experienced in Suffolk County. And obviously Nassau County has a role in this. They have asked us to be there, their liaisons, their counsel on how to prepare and plan for and ultimately execute a successful Stand Down.

So we've been meeting with them on a regular basis. We have -- our fingerprints are all over the event. We're going to be very prominent in terms of that event and its success or failure and we're very proud of that. We're very proud of the fact that VA acknowledges our successes and has asked us to fill that role in advising them on just how to go about doing this.

So as time goes on, we'll be working with our committees as we do with our events, doing the advertising and the outreach and so forth to make people aware. But it'll be -- it'll coincide on the 28th with the opening of the Vietnam Wall. So we're hoping for a pretty substantial turnout. We know that the Vietnam veterans will be there in numbers because of the wall. We're hoping that that will translate into the Stand Down being very, very successful.

We recently held our Armed Forces Day Ceremony. That was last Saturday. The event was very successful. It ran a little bit long. I for some reason seemed to not be able to shut myself up. And the program ran on for a bit. But we were blessed with wonderful weather. It was a terrific event. We were a little bit lighter in attendance this year than we have been in recent years. But that was not necessarily a bad thing. We were competing unfortunately with a couple of other things that were taking place on the Island, Suffolk County primarily.

And one of them was, you may all remember the name of Lieutenant Joseph Theinert, who was the soldier from Shelter Island who was killed last year. Last Thursday or the Thursday before last, Lieutenant Theinert's unit from Fort Drum, New York, traveled down from Fort Drum as a unit to Shelter Island to spend time with the family and, you know, spend some time remembering the Lieutenant. The family much to their credit with the unit present on Shelter Island, they had wonderful support from the local officials and the local veterans community on Shelter Island, Legislator Romaine is aware of this, with the American Legion and so forth. They could have had memorials, there could have been any number of things as we do and so appropriately do on a regular basis.

What the family chose to do, and they worked very closely with the Town, and it was very successful was, rather than mourn his loss and do the memorial thing that we all have become so familiar with, they spent the weekend celebrating his life, which I thought was really, really refreshing and just a very healthy outlook on the tragic event. So it was very well attended. Unfortunately many of the folks that we would normally have had at our event were drawn to Lieutenant {Finert's} event. And if we're going to lose anybody to a competing event, I couldn't be more proud to have them have gone there. But I wanted to make mention of the fact that that event did take place and we look forward to -- not that we want any more losses, but certainly those who we have lost, we look forward to be able to continue to celebrate their lives and remember their sacrifices.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:
Hi, Tom.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Hi.

LEG. ANKER:
I just want to thank you again for having that event. It was absolutely beautiful. The weather was just perfect. And you really gave such an inspiring presentation, especially at the end with your wife when you gave the rose to your wife.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
I paid a dear price for that.

LAUGHTER

LEG. ANKER:
And your mother-in-law. It was just very heartwarming. And my dad's a disabled vet. And it was so nice seeing the ladies with the Navy -- the little Roses, you know, that they get for the donations. So I really enjoyed attending. But, again, thank you for your work. We really appreciate it.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
I thank you for that and I thank you for joining us. It really was a wonderful day.

We're working on a program -- I may have mentioned this in the past -- but it's beginning to move forward now and gain some momentum. We're attempting to establish a veterans discount program in Suffolk County. And what we're trying to do is develop maybe a pamphlet or a brochure of something. We're not sure how we'll be printing it. But what we're doing is we're approaching local business owners and we're asking very simply, if a veteran comes into your establishment, many of you already offer discounts for students and seniors, etcetera, would you be willing to entertain a discount for veterans or service members should they come into your establishment?

It's being met with pretty good results. Most the people that we approach, if they don't commit to it, will at least tell us that they'll consider it. But, again, as we go forward, and as we try to develop this, I'd like to have this implemented before the end of the year. If any of you are aware of any businesses or any entity in your districts that you think might be willing to participate in a program like this, we'd love to hear from them and certainly we can use all of the assistance that you can provide us with on this.

And the person coordinating this through my office is David Rivera. And he can be reached at our main number which is 853-VETS, 8387. And, again, the amount of the discount is entirely up to the business owner whether it be 3%, 5%, 10%, free oil change, whatever it is that they'd be willing to step forward with. We're happy to work with anybody and everybody. And, you know, again, this is yet another benefit that we can extend to the veterans community.

And if I can -- if you're deployed and your wife can go into Tom's Automotive and get a free oil change, that's $30 that they can spend on groceries and not worry about, you know, something else. So it -- it may be small in scale, but it potential is meaningful to the recipients of the benefit.

And I think that really is it for my remarks. If anybody has any questions, I'd be more than happy --

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Any questions?

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Director, thank you so much for being with us today. Good to see you're doing well; good to have you with us. And as we spend time in our communities, we share all of your sentiments as we wish our veterans and their families well during this Memorial Day Weekend. And, please, if there are events that your office would like to share with our local offices, and of course we'll do the same back and forth, and with all of your initiatives, please always feel free to let us know how we can be of assistance.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
I thank you very much. We will put a list together of the events that we're participating in. It's easier to exclude ours or include them, however you might choose to look at it and weigh that against whatever else is going on because there is so much happening this weekend. But the

events that we'll be participating in, I'll have my office e-mail out to each of your offices so that you have it available to you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
And, of course, anything that we can do to help.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:
Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
All right. Thanks so much for being with us.

Let's see. Let's do Holly; and then we'll move go onto presentations.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:
I'll be quick. Can you all hear me? We had our luncheon last week. We had about 780 people at the luncheon at Villa. We had the Senior of the Year, {Zena Nayer} who is a retired senior volunteer, volunteer out at Smithtown, wonderful lady. Everything was well attended. The celebration went well and we had a great Senior of the Year.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
You missed me. I was in Boston, sorry.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:
We did miss you dancing, that's true. You know, it wasn't the same.

LAUGHTER

Our Office just sent out invitations to a one-hour training that's being held on June 17th over in the media room. And that is a training that we're doing on changes to the EPIC Program, prescription program for New York State. The change is happening July 1st but then there's also major changes to the program. It's totally being revamped as of January 1st, 2012. So we do have a representative from EPIC coming down to do training for our HICAP volunteers, our staff and we're sending out to contractors and other interested parties. So if you have staff members who can spare an hour, because I think with the changes that are coming down, you may get some phone calls in your office. If you can't send anybody, you know, you can have them call our office. So that's fine. June 17th. I believe it's ten o'clock but the letters should have gone out to your offices. If you don't have it, you know have them call our office, we'll get it for you. Because, you know, they keep changing everything on the state level so I just want everybody to be aware of that.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
And, Holly, you know Ginny from my office, and how good she was being an advocate for everybody who called with problems. She retired. And she said, *you know what, Medicaid is a full-time job for me just doing all the paper work.* The paper work that seniors have to deal with, with insurance is such a burden.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:
There was a lot of changes with the -- with the EPIC Program. And then the open enrollment period for the prescription Part D is being moved up this year so it's not going to be the November -- I think it was November 15th to December 31st. I believe it's going to be starting earlier than that by a couple of weeks. And we'll get that word out to you as soon as we have that information. But, again, these are all things that happen and the seniors scurry around. So I think everybody -- it's important for all your offices to know about that, you know, just to let you know.

And the other thing I just wanted to mention is we had been working with Joann from the VA to get

the word out on the East End to the senior centers. I saw her yesterday. She was at an outreach in Mattituck, and, you know, we've been working to get the names of who she should talk to, what centers are really busy, that kind of thing. Because they're doing a great job trying to do the outreach to get the veterans out to the clinic. So, that's another little sideline.

Is there anything else I can answer for you? Questions? Happy Memorial Day.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Holly, thanks so much. Take care.

Okay. It is my pleasure to welcome representatives from our Long Island State Veterans Home. Jonathan Spier, Joseph Lapietra, welcome, welcome. Please, come on up and join us. Welcome.

MR. LAPIETRA:
Thank you. Thank you. Good morning everyone. I'm Joseph Lapietra. I'm the Deputy Executive Director of the Long Island State Veterans Home and Jonathan Spier is the Director of Community Relations. Jonathan's put together a wonderful presentation that will serve to help you understand the services that the Long Island State Veterans Home can offer veterans here in Suffolk County certainly as well as Nassau or any other county in the State of New York. So it's a great home. We've been around for about 20 years. A lot of you have been there. You're always welcome to come visit. And we welcome all our County Legislators and state representatives because the home is a great place. There are five state veteran homes in the state and 140 across the country. And we think we're the best one around. We're the only one with a 40-slotted adult daycare program.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
We agree.

MR. LAPIETRA:
Thank you. And, you know, we serve 350 veterans. Our goal is to keep all of those beds filled because when they're filled, we serving maximum amount of veterans. I thank you.

Jonathan will do this program. He works hard at that and he'll be able to present it. Thank you.

SLIDE SHOW PRESENTATION

MR. SPIER:
Thank you, Joe. Mr. Chairman, members of the Veterans and Senior Committee, thank you for the opportunity to be here today. One thing I wanted just -- I think Joe forgot to mention, Fred Sganga, the Executive Director sends his regards. He was unable to make it here today; had a previous engagement but he does appreciate all your support. And we do get a lot of support from the Suffolk County Legislature. So thank you, again.

So as you are all well aware, there's about 200,000 veterans here on Long Island. Suffolk ranks, I believe, number one in the state. And our issue is really getting the information to veterans. Many are clients; were 18, 19, 20 years old when they left for the military. And the last thing they wanted to know about was their benefits as a veteran. So that's our struggle these days, is to get the message out there.

Many veterans are aware of Northport. A great facility, Northport VA. We are not the VA. And we get confused -- that confusion out in the community quite often. So that's what Joe, Fred and I are out in the community often just to explain how we're different. And I have a little power point presentation today to explain that. There's a lot of slides. I'm going to go through them pretty rapidly.

I did supply packages for each member. It has our brochure, our skilled nursing brochure as well as

our Adult Day Health Care brochure, our mission vision value statement as well as our fact sheet and the power point presentation. And at the end I really want to focus on veterans' benefits because there are incredible benefits for staying -- for a veteran who stays at the Long Island State Veterans Home or any state veterans home that, I think, the committee will be very interested. And it will be real helpful to get that message out to the veterans community.

So with that being said, we'll start off, we are a 350 bed skilled nursing facility, as Joe said, and a 40 slot Adult Day Health Care program. The services that we do provide: We provide short term rehabilitation. We have an excellent physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech therapy program. We also provide long-term care, skilled nursing care. We have a respiratory unit, an Alzheimer's, dementia-care unit. We call it our Reflections Unit. It specializes in our male veterans who are ambulatory. Those are the ones you hear about in the community that have trouble in the community, often wander and get lost. We welcome them from home. We take them into a safe surprised environment. We have specialized dedicated staff who are specially trained in dealing with the Alzheimer and dementia-related disorders on that unit. They do a wonderful job.

We also do a lot of end of life care. That's what we are doing lately. The majority of our population right now is the World War II generation, in their late 80's, early 90's. In the course of the year we turn about two thirds of our beds over to death and dying. And we pride ourselves on being good end of life care providers, hospice care, palliative care. You know, we try to go the extra mile in providing their last days here as good ones. So that's one other service that we provide. And as well as our medical model Adult Day Health Care program. We think it's a great program that keeps veterans out of a nursing home. It's a six-day a week program, roughly 9 AM to 3 PM. We pick you up at home, bring you to our facility, provide you a extensive breakfast and lunch, provide all your medical needs, medical monitoring, if you need Albuterol treatment, if you need blood sugar monitoring; you need a bath or a haircut, we provide that as well.

You're with us in a safe, supervised environment for about six hours. You're receiving stimulation, social interaction with other fellow veterans and peers. We'll provide you with any rehabilitation that might be required. We'll coordinate any medical care with a community physician. And what's nice at the end of the day, you get to spend -- you know, you get to return home in your community and spend the day with your family, your loved one and can return to us the next day. So you're receive nursing home care without having to be in a nursing home. And let's face it, nobody wants to be in a nursing home so we think this is a great model. Economically we think it's a great model. You know, for people on Medicaid, so we're trying to really promote that.

Our one draw back is you have to be within a one-hour drive time. So we cannot reach veterans on the East End right now. We can get to about Riverhead. And we can get to about the Nassau/Suffolk border. We do have future plans to expand it to Nassau County, to try to develop a satellite adult daycare program. We're the only state veterans home in the country now that operates an Adult Day Health Care program. And we will be hopefully the first in the country to operate a satellite adult daycare program as well.

So like I said, we're not part of the VA, but we have an affiliation with the VA where we have a partnership. State veterans homes are owned and operated by the state. So we are actually one of 140 state veterans home across the country. There are five state veterans homes in New York. And believe it or not the state veterans home is the single largest provider of long-term care for veterans. There are about 30,000 beds across the United States. So we care for more veterans than the VA does in terms of long-term care.

There is five obviously Long Island state veterans home serving Nassau and Suffolk County. You have Batavia, which is in the Buffalo area. We have Montrose in the lower Hudson Valley; Oxford, New York near Binghamton; and then our next closest is St. Albans, Queens, Jamaica, Queens.

So how do you get into the Long Island State Veterans Home? That's another big confusion. People assume you have to be a wartime veteran. People think you have to have a service

connected disability. That's not true. As long as you're an honorably discharged veteran; you could have been peeling potatoes in North Carolina your whole military career. That is fine; as long as you're honorably discharged, we will accept you.

We also accept widows and spouses of honorably discharged veterans as well as Gold Star parents. So what makes us special? We are a different nursing home. And we encourage everybody to come and see it. Joe and I can only do so much explaining it. But unless you come and walk through our doors and experience it, it doesn't do it justice. We're special because of our mission vision values. We are a special place because we're taking care of a very special population. You have our mission vision value statement in your packet. We're proud of it. It's a commitment that our workforce takes to -- taking care of America's heroes. We recognize that we have a special culture. We have a very special population and our employees realize that. And I think that translates into higher employee morale, lower staff turnover. And between those two, we believe, and we can show that it results in higher quality of care and higher compassionate care for our veterans.

So what makes it different about the Long Island State Veterans Home? We have a full array of inhouse services. We have a great partnership with the VA. But it's more -- you know, we worry about the quality of life like hospitals do. But we more worry about and focus on the quality of life -- excuse me -- we worry about the quality of care but we also worry about the quality of life. Quality of life is a big component to our veterans.

So we have some of the comprehensive services we provide. We have full-time physicians at our building. Most nursing homes use the community doctor model. We have five full-time doctors on staff so we believe our veterans are receiving a higher level of care using our in-house doctor model. We also have an in-house pharmacy. We don't have to wait for the local CVS or other pharmacy delivery system to bring us our medications. When a physician makes that medication change, it automatically gets sent electronically downstairs. And we usually have that medication up on the floor within the hour.

We have on-site audiology, ophthalmology, dentistry, podiatry, psychiatric and psychological services. We keep our veterans inhouse. We don't have to put them on a van in the middle of winter and send them out into the community to go see the audiologist or to go see the dentist. Everything's inhouse. So we really believe that adds to the quality of life that we provide our veterans.

We talked about physical occupational, speech therapies. As you can we're a full service facility at the Long Island State Veterans Home. You've heard of a teaching hospital. We're also a teaching nursing home. Being located on the campus of Stony Brook University also makes the home very special. We are affiliated with an academic medical center as part of our teaching mission. So we are a training site for many future healthcare providers. We believe this provides our residents with the most up to date practices and standards out there, which we believe adds to the quality of care that we can provide.

We're reviewed twice a year as you guys are aware: Department of Health as well as the Veterans Administration. We're pleased to report, you know, in our last department -- excuse me -- Veterans Administration survey back in December, we were deficiency-free, which is a pretty remarkable accomplishment. There's about -- about 158 standards in that -- the big book. About 158 standards. Not many state veterans homes are deficiency-free. And, of course, every year we are in the top one percent of state veterans homes in the county.

Quality of life, very important to us. We have a different population. Most nursing homes in America, 75% female, 25% male. Not at the State Veterans Home. We're about 90% male, 10% female. So we do things a little differently. Father's Day is coming up. We have belly dancers coming in for Father's Day. You know -- we -- our guys last night went to Belmont Race Track. We do do a lot of things for ladies. We do high tea and we take them out to the nice restaurants. But

it's a male-dominated population, which is different than what you see in the nursing home, which makes our place exciting.

Besides the great activities, you see a large number of volunteers because the spouse is usually still alive. So what you see is many family members, many grandparents, many grand kids in the building. So when you enter our building on a weekend, it's like Grand Central Station, which is nice. We're not your quiet little nursing home.

We get a large number of volunteers. We have about 325 core volunteers. They've contributed 38,000 hours of dedicated service to the Vets Home last year. Again, we really -- our model is we have something for everyone. We're not just bingo. We do multi-sensory stimulation, one-to-one computer programs at the bedside. Many intergenerational programs with local schools in our area. We have pet therapy. We have our own in-house service dog named Aaron, who's roaming the halls during the day providing pet therapy to our residents. Many different clubs including gardening, photography, cooking.

Last week we competed in the Golden Games against 14 different nursing homes. And I'd like to say our veterans kicked some butt. We took fourteen medals home. And we are -- we have a target on our back now from all the other nursing homes. I see my colleagues. And they start cursing at me because, you know, they know the veterans are coming. And we take the Olympian Golden Games very seriously in our building. So we do a nice little pep rally. We have Walter the mascot and the Stony Brook Marching Band send them off. And they came home victorious.

I'll move ahead. As you can see, we're different. And we pride ourselves on that. We have a commitment to satisfaction. We do an independent customer satisfaction survey. Over 97% of our residents and families could easily recommend us to a family member or neighbor. We like that, but we think we could do better. We want -- our goal is 100% satisfaction from all our families, but we do take that very seriously. We have, like I said, an independent company from Utah that polls about 10% of our population every month.

The finance piece, this is real important. I'm going to talk quickly about the VA per diem. Talk about our daily rate, a great benefit, is a new benefit, our 70% service connected disabled veterans and Aid & Attendance. We all know longtime care is real expensive. This is how expensive it is on Long Island. The average is about $145,000 a year in New York City. Long Island's about 144,000; Rochester about 99,000. I think we all need to go to Buffalo. About 92,000. It's a bargain.

So briefly, the VA per diem program is a program, it's the oldest federal/state partnership in government history. It started way back with Abraham Lincoln after the Civil War trying to reunite the north and south. We put this program together to help care for our aging veterans. Veterans receive $94.59 per diem towards the cost of care when staying at a state veterans home. Our adult daycare is $73.51. This is a federal benefit that all veterans receive at a state veterans home. So this is how we apply it.

Average cost of care on Long Island's about 425 a day. Our private pay rate is about 389. We deduct the $94 a day so for a veteran to stay at the Long Island State Veterans Home, it's about $295 a day. That's a tremendous savings. And we try to pass that on to our veterans so they understand that. The average cost on Long Island, those are the new numbers, about 155,000. We check that number every January 1st. So it's about a $47,000 savings for someone who is paying privately.

These are some of our daily rates at other state veterans homes. So we believe the State Veterans Home Program is the best economical decision for a veteran requiring skilled nursing care. Again, a lot less than your average nursing home cost.

Seventy percent service connected veteran, this is a tremendous benefit. Any veteran who has a

70% service connected disability rating that's determined by the VA will receive full cost of care at a state veterans home. That's a tremendous benefit. The VA pays their skilled nursing care in full. This was signed into law back in 2006 by President Bush. It was enacted by the VA in 2009. And the key component here is, there are many veterans in nursing homes, community nursing homes that do not know about this benefit. So, there's two pieces here: One they might be paying privately, paying hundreds of thousands of dollars a year when they're entitled to this free -- you know, free care. This is a benefit that they earned that they do not know about. These people were injured during combat; to receive a 70% service connected ranking.

Secondly, many of these veterans are on the Medicaid Program. So they are in a nursing home in a community on Medicaid. Well, if they're 70% service connected, the VA will pick up their cost of care so we have the potential of taking these veterans off the New York State Medicaid Program saving the County and the State hundreds of thousands of dollars. We have taken about 26 veterans off the Medicaid Program in the last eighteen months.

Fred actually gave some testimony to the Medicaid redesign team. It's on their long list of initiatives. We think this is a great way for the State and County to save money, but it's connecting the dots, I think, is going to be the greatest challenge. How do we, you know, discover, how do we uncover where our 70% service connected veterans are? You know, the VA obviously has this information. It's getting that information to Social Services. It's getting that maybe to the State Veterans Affairs Department and then ultimately getting it into the right hands of, you know, the families and giving them that option that they can go to a state veterans home. So it's something to think about. We'd be more than happy to help you with that. But we think this a tremendous benefit that really needs to get out there and very few people know.

Lastly, we have Aid & Attendance, another tremendous benefit. It's an additional VA pension. Honorably discharged veterans who served during the wartime who need skilled nursing care and usually fall within an annual income limit, usually if they're on Medicaid, they will qualify, will receive this special VA pension. If a veteran resides at a state veterans home, they receive an enhanced benefit of $658 a month for their own personal use. This is excluded from Medicaid {MAMY}. It goes in their own pocket.

If a veteran is in a community nursing home, they only receive $90 a month. So that's a substantial difference. It's a $500 a month difference if they stay at a state veterans home versus being in the community. So it's significant. It can help. If their spouse is still in the community, they pay taxes, they pay the mortgage, support their kids or support the grand kids. So it's another benefit that we -- we're looking for assistance to help educate families about and veterans about the enhanced Aid & Attendance Program at a state veterans home. And if you need more information, here's my little commercial, 444-VETS. Very simple phone number or you can always check us out at the web at LIstateveteranshome.org.

And in summary the Long Island State Veterans Home will remain committed to its core mission of providing high quality compassionate skilled healthcare services to New York State for elderly veterans and their families during their greatest time of need.

Any questions? We thank the Committee for having us. I tried to be brief but there's a lot to say about the Long Island State Veterans Home. It's a lot of information to cover, but if you have any questions whatsoever, please give us a call. We appreciate your time.

LEG. ROMAINE:
We have a nursing home you can help us with.

MR. SPIER:
No comment.

LAUGHTER

CHAIRMAN STERN:
We thank you both for being with us today.

MR. LAPIETRA:
Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
In probably close to 20 years that I've had the opportunity to speak from time to time with residents who have loved ones who have been there at the Long Island State Veterans facility, it has been nothing short of a one hundred percent rate of outstanding care that their loved ones receive. So it's something that we all appreciate working with area residents knowing that -- and their families -- knowing that they continue to receive outstanding care at the Long Island State Veterans facility. Of course anything that we can do to be of assistance along the way, always please feel free to let us know.

And also a special congratulations to you from this Committee on the assessment that you just received yesterday that put you in the top one percent of the facilities across the country. And, of course, that's an awful lot to be proud of so congratulations.

MR. SPIER:
Thank you very much.

MR. LAPIETRA:
Thank you very much.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
We have one more presentation for us this morning. It is my pleasure to welcome Katie McGowan and Mitch Beller, a unique organization in our community HorseAbility, the Horses for Heroes Program. Welcome.

MS. McGOWAN:
Thank you. Good afternoon, Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for having us. I am Katie McGowan. I am the proud and privileged founder and Executive Director of HorseAbility. I have one of our committee and board members, Mitch Beller, with me.

I am the founder and Executive Director for HorseAbility for 19 years. And we are a therapeutic horseback riding program located in Melville, Long Island. And for those of you that are unfamiliar with us, I let you know that we service people, young people, adults including veterans with special needs to offer them physical, mental and emotional and spiritual therapy as needed.

In 2007 we started a program for veterans. And we work with the hospital in Northport. We have currently been working with a group of geriatrics from their recreational department, which has been wonderful. We have at our facility physical therapist, occupational therapists, speech and language therapists as well as social workers and psychologists working with us. And we utilize the horse as a tool for treatment.

Now the gentleman -- the two gentlemen that just were up here, they offer amazing, amazing services. And one thing I didn't hear, though, is that they offer therapeutic horseback riding or hypnotherapy so we'll have to talk at the end of today.

LAUGHTER

However, you know, I have been to many committee meetings. I've had the honor of speaking and getting the word out there about our program. We recently have been expanding our program because there's such a need for alternative services. One of the things that I found most is that -- the trouble is to reach the veterans, whether it be the young or the old. It's been such a struggle for everybody. We've been fundraising to offer these services free of service to the veteran and their family.

I was at a meeting just yesterday with Supervisor Venditto discussing how there's so many services out there and people are looking for the veterans. What we were talking about yesterday and what I'd love to bring here today is the possibility of collaboration of working to get the word out there. We have such unique services and intriguing opportunity. So, for example, I was leaving the meeting yesterday and one gentleman said, "oh, I'd love to come, can I bring my grandchildren?"

Now if that's the way to get somebody to the facility to learn about all the services, to work with the facility, the gentlemen that was just up here to speak to other services and organizations that offer opportunities for the veterans, and I say use us as that venue because how can we reach out to these people that need the services? Not just ours; yes, of course, we want to offer it to them. But others that are so necessary and they're out there.

So, one of the things, of course, we're always fundraising, we always need support, money is always something that is needed. However, that's not my primary purpose of being here today. It's to let you know the services that we offer, to ask you if there's any way that you can help guide us, support us as well as us help to reach out to the community to let people know of the services and whether or not we can utilize us as a venue to attract, especially the young people coming back that don't -- possibly don't want to associate themselves with being a veteran at this point in time. They're too young to be that person in their mind. And this is a unique way for somebody that is, say, is an amputee or has traumatic brain injury, their family that's been affected. We do -- social workers work with our clientele and do family services with them.

So there's so much opportunity to reach out to the veterans, to the family, to the community. We also are a volunteer base program. We have over 350 volunteers that join us throughout the year. And we also have veterans that are volunteers of ours. And it's a great opportunity for them to show up, have some place to go on a daily basis or weekly basis, however their commitment is. And we also have daily living skills projects and groups that we offer. It's an opportunity for -- a vast opportunity for so many people to do different things, to get involved, to bring them out of their homes, to get them to be in the fresh air, to be with nature, to be with others. So there's so much opportunity. I'm looking for guidance and collaboration and also to bring to you what I've seen so many other times, which I'm sure you all have, about how to reach the folks that need -- the awareness of what's out there, the opportunities. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:
Hi. I just want thank you again for the work that you do. I'm a horse owner. My daughter's been jumping for -- since she was five and she's 19 now. We're over at District Six. Do you work in other areas other than the Melville area?

MS. McGOWAN:
Currently we are not. We service our facility -- our facility services all of Long Island, also the five boroughs. However, that's where our facility's located. We have one space there.

LEG. ANKER:
I'm trying to think how we can get the people over to you. And Melville's a little bit further down the road from the Rocky Point Point/Mt. Sinai area.

MS. McGOWAN:
I'm glad you asked that because the VA Hospital in Northport has committed to transporting any veteran that would like to have the service; that they will go and pick them up, whether it be at the hospital, at their home, at their family's home, bring them to the facility, wait there while they're having treatment, while they're participating in activities and then bring them back home.

LEG. ANKER:
That's good to know. And they're allowed to bring their grandchildren? That would work or no?

MS. McGOWAN:
Absolutely. Any way that we can get the information out -- not just our information, but information and resources for the veteran, that's our purpose here. Our facility specifically offers the physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech and psychological, you know, type of therapy. However, like I said, if we can collaborate somehow, do some kind of event, just an open house of some kind, not just to showcase our facility and our services but also others to let -- to get the excitement and the interest and bring in people such as -- through the grandchildren. Your daughter, for example, so you know the power of horses and the magic and the miracles horses bring to people's lives.

LEG. ANKER:
It's amazing, you know, whether you're young or old or disabled or not; you know, my father's a disabled vet. And when we get together, they're out there, they're, you know, in the stables, in the barn. And it's just magical. I know there's a horse stable, they offer free -- it's free, the disabled horse -- there in -- Saddle Rock? Are you familiar with that?

MS. McGOWAN:
Saddle Rock, sure. Saddle Rock is a program that we mentor and train them to do the work that they do. So, yes, Saddle Rock is a newer program. Like I aid, we've been around 19 years.

So we are North America Riding for the Handicapped Association, premier accredited center which means that we offer the training. So most, if not all, of the riding programs on Long Island, which I'm thrilled that there are so many for therapeutic riding; however, we have been part of the training or mentorship of -- if not all, 99 percent of them.

LEG. ANKER:
That's great. And one other thing. Erica was part of the Pony Club.

MS. McGOWAN:
Sure.

LEG. ANKER:
That's another wonderful organization --

MS. McGOWAN:
Sure.

LEG. ANKER:
-- for the kids. Have you worked with them to try promote together?

MS. McGOWAN:
Yes, we have pony clubs -- two different pony clubs that have volunteered for us on a yearly basis. But also our veterans program currently is running on Thursdays between 10 and 12. Right now is one of our groups. So our pony clubbers are in school at that time. But we do have older, retired adults that join us for that time.

LEG. ANKER:
Thank you.

MS. McGOWAN:
Thank you. Who would I follow up with to speak about possible collaborative opportunity as a venue for interest to gather folks and families and so on?

CHAIRMAN STERN:
There are a lot of organizations that we all have the opportunity to work with in our communities, particularly veterans organizations; plenty of business development organizations that we're all familiar with as well. I'm sure you are, too. But we can certainly help make introductions. But I would think that -- he's not with us, he had to leave, but the Director of our Veterans Services Agency Tom Ronayne --

MS. McGOWAN:
Tom Ronayne, sure.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
-- is someone that you should spend some time with and see what kind of synergies you can develop as a way to provide these services; at least get the word out to our area veterans.

MS. McGOWAN:
Yes, we have spoken. So, that's good.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
And there are family resource groups that work with our veterans and their families, particularly those that are returning home. They might be -- and we're in touch with them quite frequently so we can have you speak with them as well.

MS. McGOWAN:
Thank you. That'd be wonderful. The one thing is there are so many groups and I've been in contact, in touch and they've reached out to us as well. It's just about who's going to take the first jump at doing a collaborative effort here, because all of these organizations are all struggling with the same issue; is finding them, getting them to participate, so.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
We can continue this conversation.

MS. McGOWAN:
Thank you. Terrific.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
See what we can do to help

MS. McGOWAN:
Fabulous. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Sure. Thanks so much for being with us today.

MS. McGOWAN:
I have some brochures. Should I just approach you all? Or I'll give them to Debbie? Thank you. Have a great day.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. You, too.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:
Steve, I misspoke earlier when I was asking Holly a question a question. I talked about Ginny and being retired and Medicaid. I meant Medicare. I wanted to correct that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:
Anybody else? Thank you very much. We are adjourned.

THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 12:44 PM
{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY