

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 June 13, 2011.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Leg. Steven H. Stern, Chairman
Leg. Sarah Anker, Vice Chair (excused absence)
Leg. Vivian Vilorio-Fisher
Leg. Edward P. Romaine (excused absence)
Leg. Lou D'Amaro

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Sarah Simpson, Assistant Counsel
Alicia Howard, Legislative Aide
Eric A. Kopp, County Executive's Office
Tom Ronayne, Director of Veterans Service Agency
Paul Perillie, Aide to Majority Leader
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern
Jack Caffey, Aide to Presiding Officer
William Shilling, Aide to Leg. Anker
Tom Ryan, Aide to Leg. Vilorio-Fisher
Justin Littell, Aide to Leg. D'Amaro
Sergeant Michael D. Kaplan, Huntington Hwy/US Army
Barbara Kaplan, wife of Sergeant Kaplan
Pat Irving, Deputy Superintendent of Highways TOM
Rick Brand, Newsday
Benny Pernice, Budget Review Office
And all other interested parties

VERBATIM MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher, Court Stenographer

THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:50 AM

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Hello everyone. Welcome to the Committee on Vets and Seniors. I ask everyone to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by our Deputy Presiding Officer Legislator Vilorio-Fisher.

SALUTATION

I ask everybody to remain standing and join us in a moment of silence as we keep all our brave men and women fighting for our freedom overseas in our thoughts and prayers.

MOMENT OF SILENCE OBSERVED

Thank you and welcome to our meeting today. Hope everyone had an enjoyable weekend. It's a pleasure to welcome our Director of Veterans Services Agency Director Ronayne. Hello, Director.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good morning. And thank you, again, as always for the invitation to appear before you.

I've got a couple of items that I would like to address this morning, one of which specifically will go to the Deputy Presiding Officer's concerns at our last session with regard to deployment, its impact on our female veterans, our families and specifically our children. I've got some information. Certainly not everything that you asked for, but we're working on it.

Before I begin I would like first to say thank you for his service and welcome home to Sergeant Kaplan and thank him for joining us here today. We should all be proud to be in a room with another one of our brave service members. Thank you, Sergeant Kaplan.

As you all know, we recently last Friday were very, very pleased to be a part of the ribbon cutting ceremony in Riverhead for our community-based outpatient clinic at the new facility that is being operated by the Department of Veterans Affairs in the County Center Office Center in Riverhead. The ribbon cutting was a tremendous success. My greatest pleasure from the event came from the fact that we had so many people, many officials who had not previously or otherwise been able to visit the facility and see firsthand what it is and what potential exists for serving our East End veterans. It truly is a world class facility. It is state-of-the-art. It is staffed by extremely capable and committed professionals. And we're already seeing wonderful results from this clinic having been opened.

It opened several weeks prior to the ribbon cutting. We had a soft opening. We wanted to get in there a little bit early, work out any kinks that may exist, adjust staffing, appointment transportation issues. Those all seem to be working just fine. And just as we had anticipated, one of the side effects of having a successful clinic serving our veterans, our East End veterans is now that our Veterans Service Agency Offices are seeing significantly more veterans by virtue of the fact that we are in the same building.

We actually, during the construction of the VA clinic, physically had our offices moved. We rebuilt and had our offices moved from where we had been on the second floor, on the other end of the building, on the west end of the building near the Health Department. We moved next door to the clinic. So we actually share a common wall. When a veteran is visiting the VA facility, they can literally walk out one door and they'll be entering our offices, which I think is just a commonsense approach to proximity of services for the veterans, is really what we want to provide them. These folks have been so underserved on the East End for so very long, you know, let's make it as easy as possible for them. Let's not have them jump through hoops to attain services. Let's bring them, as much as we can, bring them to them. And that seems to be working very, very well. So we're

happy with that.

I'll touch on something that -- I won't go very much into it, but I think I need to touch on it only because I'm sure many of you over the weekend saw in the papers that there had been an issue in Nassau County concerning the Veteran Service Agency. Our sister agency in Nassau County apparently had a situation where it had been discovered that there were a number of claims filed -- or not filed for veterans. It appears now that the case or the situation involves a total of 97 veterans, spouses or surviving widows or widowers with approximately 200 claims for those 97 folks that had apparently been packed away in a box or two. And some aged as long as six years and have not been filed with the Department of Veterans Affairs. So obviously these veterans are been languishing, waiting for some result on their claims whereas the claims have never been properly filed.

They have now been turned over to the Department of Veterans Affairs. It appears that the Department of Veterans Affairs has extended themselves and agreed that they will expedite the processing of these claims and that the timeline will not be an issue for them; that they will accept and process these claims.

The reason that I bring this up is that I want to assure not only the Legislature and this Committee, but certainly every resident, every taxpayer and every veteran in Suffolk County the policies and the procedures that we follow in the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency do not and would not allow this to occur. We have a very strict protocol that we follow when it comes to submitting claims on behalf of our clients.

As a rule we file only claims that are what we refer to as ready to rate, which is simply a term that is used within the Department of Veterans Affairs. When the adjudicators and the raters receive these folders and have to review the claims and make a determination as to their merits and decide whether a claim is granted or denied or deferred, our claims are submitted as ready to rate, which means that they generally will not require any additional evidence or information to be submitted as a follow-up. And that it is reasonable to expect that a decision or an adjudication could occur from that file.

Those files from my office as often as we can depending on the complexity or the simplicity of the claim, and the nature of what it is, sometimes are much easier than others. We file our claims in anywhere from one to 30 days; okay? There are instances where cases sit in the office for more than 30 days. Those are exceptions. And they almost exclusively are cases where we have extensive additional information or evidence required to be submitted to us on part -- on the part of the veteran. Often that is not the fault of the veteran or a matter of complacency. But some of the stuff is not readily available. People don't know where records are that may have been sitting in a box for X numbers of years at home or somewhere else. They may have to be requested through federal and state agencies very often. And these things do take time.

Generally when that occurs, and I'll go back to what I said a moment ago, we file ready to rate. We will submit certain claims with the notation that there will be additional evidence or information to follow. We prefer not to do that because it complicates things at the VA. We don't want that. Obviously there's already a backlog at the VA. We'll do what we can in Suffolk County to not contribute to that backlog. If our cases are easily rateable, they don't spend a great deal of time -- we get our veterans their decisions more quickly.

That being said, we occasionally do have a file that will go beyond 30 days. Never does that occur without written communication. We have correspondence with every veteran, every client regarding their claims. And certainly with the cases that are pending additional information, we always correspond and we have -- these folders are flagged so that every 30 days an additional letter will go out reminding these folks that we are waiting on certain information and doing what we can to assist in securing that information.

If at some point, and it doesn't occur frequently, but at some point when we have an issue or a situation where a veteran is not compliant, you know, sometimes it's for health reasons or, you know, any other -- for whatever the reason, we will correspond with the veteran and inform them that we are unable to go forward with their claim without the pending documentation.

If we do not receive that information and if we do not have a claim that is submit-able to the point where it would just sit at the VA and not have action taken, we do have the prerogative -- we do have the discretion to return that file to the veteran and recommend that they take follow-up action, contact us at any point in the future and we'd be happy to open it through our office, but we don't let files sit around. So there's not a box in our offices either in Hauppauge or Riverhead containing old records.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:

You had us at hello. We believe you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, I just want to make it very clear. Because I know that when I read -- actually I shouldn't say when I read it. When my wife read the article over the weekend, she was already distressed. She brought it to me. I read it. I happen to know the service officer involved. I was a little surprised when I had read the content of the Newsday report. But these things do happen unfortunately. And it's important for me. I have a great deal of pride in our agency and what we do, what we accomplish on behalf of our veterans. And I just wanted to be very clear that we would not tolerate that circumstance here.

That being said, I have called an unscheduled staff meeting with my offices today. When I leave here we'll be having a staff meeting. I will be ordering an audit of all of our service officers, of all of our claims both pending and submitted for the last six months. And we'll identify anything that is pending. If there's anything sitting around, I want to know specifically about it. And they'll go to the top of an action pile and we'll look into them. I don't anticipate that we are going to have any. But we are going to conduct an audit just to ensure that there's nothing lying around that we should be aware of that we may not be.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, these days when you submit a claim that's ready for determination, on average, what is the wait time for the agency to do its review and come back with a determination?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Very honestly it varies a great deal on the nature of the claim. An Aid and Attendance claim may be rated in three months. A claim for compensation, depending upon the complexity and the clarity, is it apparent and obvious that this is a service-related condition? Or does an argument have to be made with substantial medical evidence and other information to argue and prosecute that claim? They can take much longer. But A & A, Aid and Attendance, we generally are seeing three to four months. They can run as long as six.

Compensation claims we're seeing five to six to as much as seven or eight months, which is an improvement over just a couple of years ago. Twelve to eighteen months was not uncommon. So that is an improvement. I'd like to think that it's largely because of what we do here in Suffolk. The VA is doing a better job.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I remember we had that discussion about the length of time and the hope was with a new administrator, that that time would come down. And it's good to hear that it has; at least it's going in the right direction. Depending on the complexity of the case, obviously that's going to have a great deal to do with it, but the cases that might be for Compensation, they are taking longer. And let's say that you did submit a complete file, that in your estimation it should be approved and maybe it's just time because of their caseload, during that time you had mentioned that there is

continuing correspondence with our veteran. If there is going to be a case that takes six months to a year, does it fall under that same procedure? You're communicating with the veteran on a 30-day basis just to let them know that in your estimation it's complete; it's just pending because of the administrative backlog?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, if we have a claim -- when we submit a claim, just so that everybody has some clarity on this, when we submit a claim regardless of the nature at what the claim might represent, the VA date stamps everything that they receive from us or any other entity submitting the claim. The VA has what they call an effective date. And as far as effective dates go, the VA considers the first day of the first month following the submission of the claim to be the effective date. So if I were to submit a claim on your behalf today, it would be received in the month of June. They would date stamp it, but they would not recognize the effective date until July 1st. That would be the VA's view of when the case became their -- in their possession.

It again goes back to the complexity of the case. If we receive -- and we also get an acknowledgement letter from the VA when they have date stamped that file. We get correspondence from VA saying they have it. If we do a claim and we know that this is going to be a six to eight month wait, we do not correspond with the veteran every 30 days because we've communicated upfront that this is going to probably be a six-month wait.

If at six months we do not have a resolution, then we will initiate correspondence, both with the client and with the VA saying, you know, *where are we on this?* That gets a little dicey because when we make an inquiry at the VA, unfortunately what happens, and many of you can appreciate this through your own offices, if you have a file -- if you have a stack of files, and as time goes by you work from the top down, a file has moved near the top of the stack, somebody calls with an inquiry, you pull that file out to review it, when it gets resubmitted to the adjudicator, it's not unlikely that it would wind up at the bottom of the pile. And we really don't like to do that because it's clearly unfair to the veteran. That's something that occurs within VA. We have no control over it. It's probably a tool on their part to discourage people from making excessive inquiries. But it is a VA thing, not something with us. We do initiate correspondence when we believe that the claim should have been adjudicated or we should have had some indication as to why it has not been. So, no, we wouldn't do it -- we wouldn't correspond every 30 days on every claim. It would depend on the nature of the claim.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

But the veteran does receive a copy of the documentation that's been submitted so far so at least they know that it is now lying with the VA, that it's not in a box some place in a Suffolk County office.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Absolutely. And not only do they receive correspondence from us, but that entire file is the veteran's property. We maintain physical possession of it only because it makes practical sense. But at any time any veteran, any client whether it be a veteran, a spouse, a survivor, a dependent, if they want a copy of their entire file, we are more than happy to oblige them. That is their property. And at the conclusion or at the end of the -- whatever the process is, we are only too happy if the veteran would like to turn that entire file back over to them.

We maintain a computer record so the paper files, while they're all very helpful and we make notes that generally, you know, are, you know, thoughts that occur while we're working, we jot notes on files, not everything always makes it into the computer. So the physical -- the paper files are important. But everything that we have relative to the claim is in a proprietary database. Everything is on a password protected database that we maintain in the offices. So the files are available to the veteran in addition to just simply receiving letters. They can review everything that we have access to.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Viloría-Fisher.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:

Thank you. Mr. Ronayne, through the Chair, when you have the results of that audit, I assume you'll share them with this Committee?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I anticipated that question. I have every intention of doing so.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:

Okay, thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

All right. Thank you. As I mentioned earlier to the Deputy Presiding Officer's point, when we had last met, there was some concern about a report that had been released relating to the impact of our women veterans, the issues concerning deployment, not only of the women veterans but of the impact that it had on the families, whether it be the female veteran being deployed or the spouse, the impact on the families and the children. And I unfortunately did not have time to make copies of a CNN report that I was able to find, but I'll leave a copy with Debbie. And I'm hopeful that she'll be able to distribute it to all of you.

And it speaks to very much the issue that we had discussed here. And it's interesting because what -- one of the things that they largely followed was the mental health impact that these deployments largely on our female veterans has on family members. And when they got into the issue of the impact on children, it was interesting to read that the numbers were much higher than I would have expected to have seen them. In some cases they're referring to 19% increases in the mental health problems that are manifesting amongst children of deployed female service members. And there are many -- they go to many different areas where they try to explain why there's a difference between male deployments and female service member deployments.

They even go so far as to suggest that males -- male service members may not be as sensitive or as attuned to the mental health issues of their children. And that's why they're not being reported at the same numbers. We don't know what the real reason is. But the CNN report is pretty telling. It's a short read. It's only two pages. And again we'll have it distributed to each of you.

But when we had discussed doing the research, I got a request into the VA for some numbers. I don't know how quickly we'll be getting those. I know we'll get them. I just don't know how quickly we'll get them.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:

What's so alarming are the suicide --

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The suicides -- you know, I take great issue with the suicides because depending upon which report you read, I generally go to the monthly report that is released by the Department of Defense. I get a copy every month. That speaks to the numbers of suicides in the respective branches. And there's an area that I always have questioned. And this is me personally, I'm on the record, this is my personal opinion, not my professional opinion; but there's a category that the military has been using for a longtime. And, you know, we talk about we have our transitional warrior programs and certain things where the numbers are higher than they are in the general population of our services.

And we've had several instances right here in Suffolk County, and I won't identify anybody, but we've had instances where the question has been asked. And what the military does is they make a determination. It was a suicide, it was non-suicide, there was some other explanation. And there's a category known as under investigation. And the number of cases that go to under investigation

and remain under investigation is fairly significant. And my problem with that is that as long as an investigation remains under investigation, that number never finds itself -- find its way into a category: Was it or was it not a suicide?

So can draw your own conclusions on that. I'd be happy just for your own perusal, I'll forward the next copy that I receive from DOD, just so you can get a sense of what it is that I'm referring to. It's an interesting read. But, you know, sometimes you have to read into what you're reading. That's all I'll say on that. But the issue of the impact on the family members and so forth is clearly something that we need to look more closely at.

One of the things that I was going to ask, Mr. Chairman, with your consent, I think that it may be beneficial for the Committee, and certainly for myself, given that we have such a small military presence at this point in Suffolk County, most of our units are Reserve or National Guard component. But because we have such a small number, I thought that perhaps through you if I would be permitted to extend invitations to the Commanding Officers of each of our units to either attend a Committee session or have a representative attend and be able to answer these questions more directly.

And they'll have an insight that is, you know, more significant, relative to their own units that I could ever provide. I think that that might be an interesting way, not only for the Committee to get to know and meet these commanders and find out who they are, because they're all wonderful people, we have a good relationship with all of them. But we only have a small number of these units in Suffolk County at this time. They represent a significant number of service members. But the number of units themselves is relatively small. We only have the 69th Infantry, which as an infantry unit, they're a frontline combat unit by definition. There are no women assigned to that unit. So while Lieutenant Delli-Pizzi has been a friend to the Legislature for quite sometime now, I think he would have some insight. But there are no women assigned to that unit because of their -- because of their assigned role.

We have the 106th. Colonel Owens is the wing commander out there. He's a real advocate. There are many, many women assigned to the 106th. And they deploy on a regular basis. They go out in what we generally call onesies and twosies. They don't deploy in large numbers en masse anymore generally speaking, but they are constantly deploying. They've always got folks either on their way over or on their way back. So I think Colonel Owens or his designated representative would be able to bring a great deal to this discussion.

Chief Foreign Officers Zachary Cummings from the US Coast Guard, he is the Commanding Officer of Station Fire Island. He's got the largest number of Coast Guard folks. He's got women in his unit, I think, that a lot of people don't realize that in this war, in these wars, our Coast Guard has been deploying. We've got Coast Guard folks over in the Middle East. You know, people perceive the Coast Guard as, you know, a home front, drug interdictions and those sorts of things, but they're deploying over there. In fact Northport resident Nate Bruckenthal, who was killed in action in Iraq, was in the Coast Guard. He was the first Coast Guard man killed in combat since Vietnam. So the Coast Guard is very relevant to this discussion as well.

We've got the 146th, an aviation brigade out of MacArthur Airport. They, too, deploy. The Naval Operational Support Command in Amityville, they deploy. The 6th Comm. Battalion Marine Corps also out of Amityville, small unit, but they, too, deploy. And there's a very small Engineers Brigade also out of Amityville, the US Army Engineers Brigade, I think, their total number assigned to Amityville is under 40 soldiers. But that's to my knowledge anyway. And I think I'm pretty attuned to who these units are. That's really who we have in Suffolk County. So with your permission, whether you'd like me to invite them as a group or if you'd like to stagger it over the course of several committee meetings so that it doesn't run long, however you'd -- if you would like me to do it at all, I'd be happy to extend those invitations.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I certainly would appreciate that. We'll discuss it along the way what the best way to do that is. In fact, that's one of the reasons why we are privileged to have with us today Sergeant Kaplan. We wanted to ensure that while we -- it's always important to continue our conversation with our Veteran Services Agency about the services that we offer and how we can all do a better job in reaching out to our veterans and their families. But to hear from our returning veterans themselves, of course, is invaluable in that effort. So, yes, anything that we can do to bring them down and allow them to give us their insight on how we might be best able to assist is certainly welcomed.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And much to what you just said, it is so important -- having Sergeant Kaplan here is important certainly. But one of the things that we do so consistently is try to get the word out that while we'll serve anybody that we are able and while we go out and we do a lot of field work, town hall meetings, etcetera, we need folks to come to us. We need people like Sargent Kaplan and Lieutenant Delli-Pizzi and Colonel Owens and everybody else to make folks aware of our existence so that their troops can come to us for our services. We don't necessarily know who the individual soldiers and troops are. We do mailings. We do many, many things, but we can't knock on every door. We don't know where to find all of these folks. And it's important to have help; certainly the assistance of folks like yourselves through your district offices and Sergeant Kaplan and all of our other service members to get the word out is key to us having the ability to have a successful mission through our office.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director, thank you so much as always for being with us. I don't know what your schedule allows for, but if you have a few moments, certainly we'd love to have you remain and we'd like you to hear what Sergeant Kaplan has to say. And if you have any comments, maybe you can make yourself available for that.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Absolutely. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

With that, it is, I'm sure my colleagues would agree, a great privilege to welcome Sergeant Michael Kaplan, United States Army Reserve. Sergeant Kaplan has recently returned from his tour of duty in Iraq. And as I just mentioned, it is an ongoing goal of this Committee to reach out to our veterans and their families to see how we might best be of service to them. And so Sergeant Kaplan, welcome, and thank you for being with us. Please come join us up in the front.

SGT. KAPLAN:

Thank you for the kind words. How's that? I want to thank everybody. It's a privilege to be here speaking in front of everybody. And, you know, it's funny, I wear this uniform and people come up to me and thank me. And I really want to thank them. Because to me there's nothing like wearing this uniform; nothing at all. I'm a 46-year-old man who wears this uniform proudly.

If you don't mind, if you give me a little heavy levity, I'll give you a little background about myself. I was active duty back in 1987. My first deployment was Desert Storm. So I was about five years active duty. I got out of the Army because my son was a baby. And I said I'm never going to leave him again.

Well, he turned eighteen a couple of years ago and guess where he is right now? He's wearing this uniform up in Fort Drum. He spent 12 months in Iraq. And we were in Iraq last summer for about five weeks at the same time. It was an honor to wear this uniform alongside him. But when he says to me about three months before his high school graduation, he says, "Dad, I want to join the Army." I said "you do realize there's two wars going on. You will go." And he says "that's all right. You went to war, you did it and I'll be fine." I said "okay, all right."

So the day he joined, he said "you should join with me. Go back in the Reserves." I'm like "you are out of your mind, Steven, I'm too old, there's no way." So I found out I wasn't too old and here I am. I joined in May of 2008 -- 2009, I'm sorry. And five months later I got the call from my new First Sergeant saying I was about ready to go overseas.

So what I really wanted to talk to you about is, first of all, I'd like to thank the new Deputy of Huntington Highway Pat Irving, and it's not a plug, Mr. Stern, why I'm mentioning her is because she is a tremendous advocate and a big fan of veterans. Her father was a Korean War vet; served proudly. And I want to really -- I'd really like to, you know, everyone to notice who -- my wife is here, Barbara. And everyone thanks me, but I think people should thank the family members.

APPLAUSE

SGT. KAPLAN:

Yeah, absolutely. What I really wanted to talk to you about is my time in Iraq was okay. There was some good days, there were some bad days. But we're trained. You know, last February 4th my wife dropped me off at Laganardia Airport. And she's the love of my life. So I was thinking while I was sitting in the airport and awaiting my flight, I said how hard this must be for her. She's driving home from Laganardia Airport all by herself, she gets to the house, she's got to walk the dog, she's got to pay the bills, whatever she has to do, just that one day. Now she was staring down the face of 15 months by herself. So I said all this time it's been on my mind that we're thanked because we wear this uniform, but we're trained. We're trained. We're educated every day how to be better soldiers, how to be better citizens, everything like that. But who is here to help the family members that stay behind, that walk the dog, that pay the bills? All of those things on an everyday basis.

You know through the advent of Skype, I was very fortunate, I spoke with my wife once or twice a day. I happened to be very fortunate. But I saw there were some days where she was struggling, whether it would be, you know, the dog was giving her a hard time or my son, who was deployed at the time had a hard time. So she was on her own.

What I would love to see happen is, is a program, if you will, that maybe through the VA hospital, I don't know, for an outreach of some kind, through the family members. If you talk to any deployed soldier and you say, *well, how's it going at home*, family members of a deployed soldier, well, if you walk in their house, it's a solemn place to be. And -- because they're not educated. The family members in my estimate are not educated. You walk into a home and they're watching the news. I know for a fact it's the worst thing to do for a family member of a deployed military person, is to watch the news. But they don't know that because there are not programs out there to educate them. And I would love to see something like that happen, I really would.

But I love this uniform. I want to thank everyone for allowing me to speak. And that's it. If you have any questions for me, that's fine.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Again, Sergeant Kaplan, thanks so much for being with us. First of all, your last deployment, you said that you were going away for 15 months. Was it in fact 15 months? And then you returned or was it extended?

SGT. KAPLAN:

No. It was about four-and-a-half months of training all throughout the United States. And we -- my company hit Kuwait on June 17th of last year. So from June to April 13th of this year was about ten months of deployment in country; but almost nearly five months of training to build up to that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

So it turned out to be the 15 months that you had planned on?

SGT. KAPLAN:

In total it was absolutely 15 months, yes, sir.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Working with the Fighting 69th and the Director mentioned Delli-Pizzi, you know, his wife Beth, of course, does an outstanding job, they are involved with the family readiness group there. I'm wondering if you have had any experience with the family readiness group, the type of services that they provide. And perhaps where they might be a better synergy, where those services need to be enhanced to provide the kind of outreach services to the families that you mentioned.

SGT. KAPLAN:

Firstly, I'm not with the Fighting 69th. I'm with the 773rd Transportation Company from Queens. I'm arduously trying to get into a unit in Suffolk County.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I'm sorry to interrupt, but is there a family readiness group with your unit or does that not exist?

SGT. KAPLAN:

There is a family readiness group -- there's supposed to be one in every military company. The one that I had while I was deployed in Iraq was substandard; extremely substandard, as my wife would attest to. So I'm just trying to pump it up even more. Family readiness group is a wonderful thing, but it's mainly -- it's mainly for -- it's usually a wife -- a wife or a spouse of usually the commanding officer or a senior enlisted personnel in that unit. So a lot of times, a private, information will not filter down properly to a lower enlisted person or a lower officer that's in that unit.

And family readiness groups, in my estimation, is more just an informational type thing. In my experience is the FRG would hand out when -- where they are now, where the unit is now. They would put -- post, maybe, pictures on, maybe, a website. They would not educate -- I have not seen any educational type materials in reference to how to conduct themselves while their spouse is deployed.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Is there ever any opportunity -- maybe you have the answer, Director -- Sergeant, maybe the Director has the answer -- to participate in a FRG, is it strictly limited to the unit in which you serve? It would seem to me that if there is an organization that is located a little closer to home, but that doesn't necessarily operate under the banner of your particular unit, is there no opportunity to participate in another unit's efforts? It's strictly based on which unit you belong to?

SGT. KAPLAN:

I hear you loud and clearly. And I think there would be a -- maybe a cross level type thing from one FRG company to another FRG company. I have not seen that. And I think it would take the commanding officers of the companies to do so. I just thought maybe if it was through a little outreach program of -- through the VA, or some subsidiary of that, that they would make home visits to Suffolk County. Like the Director alluded to, there's not many military personnel in Suffolk County.

You know, if a military family got a visit from someone in uniform, I think, that would be great a boon to their morale. And if they sat there and had a meal with them, and to teach them what's -- what to expect, what not to expect, the do's and don't's of everyday life, of what you should be and what you should not be doing, as a family member that's left behind from a military person that is deployed. And FRG really does not provide that type of thing. FRG is very important, just for informational type stuff. But for morale and educational, it doesn't work, Mr. Stern.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator D'Amaro.

LEG. D'AMARO:

Thank you. Sergeant Kaplan, good morning. Thank you for coming here and sharing some insight with us. I appreciate that very much. I feel humbled by your presence here, frankly. And I want to thank you for your service to our country. And what's impressing me, also, sir, is that, of course, we're concerned about you, and you say you're proud to wear the uniform and that's wonderful and I agree with you. But your concern for your family while you're in harm's way is simply amazing, the amount of poise and courage that you're showing, not only for yourself when you're there, obviously, but also for your family is something that's very impressive.

And I agree with you. I think it's very difficult for families to cope when someone close to them, whether it's a husband, spouse, wife, family member, neighbor, you know, whoever it may be, they really don't know -- I've never experienced it, but I would assume they're very much in the dark as to what's really happening, and what your experiences are. And I can understand your statement that the worst thing that someone can do is watch the news. Because we all know that that's, you know, just a cycle that goes on and on. And you don't know what to believe and it's not really the hard information that perhaps a family would be looking for to grab onto.

So even beyond, you know, getting information, I would assume that the military, though, has an apparatus in place where information somehow flows back to family members? Or you said you were able to communicate with your wife daily or sometimes twice a day. But you're saying that there's no other -- the military doesn't provide any further type of information flow back to spouses and families and other concerned individuals while you're deployed; is that correct basically?

SGT. KAPLAN:

For the most part at my level, I agree with that. There is something called Military One Source. But basically for someone that's out in Suffolk County, Long Island, it's a hotline. It's just an 800 number. I don't know where it goes to. I believe it's somewhere in Washington. And it's just some information. Maybe it would give a spouse or a child of a deployed military person just some basic information. It's not really what I'm looking for. It's not really I think -- I don't think it's that earth shattering for someone to call a hot line and say, "you know, I'm having a hard time today, what do I do?"

LEG. D'AMARO:

But you're looking less for information. It's more about just how a family would cope with your absence. Is that really more of your concern? You know, like you said when your wife dropped you off, she was going to be alone for 15 months facing that by herself. And if there was some basic instructions, you know, just like you said, you're trained, you know, you're trained to go into the environment you're going into; but the spouse and the family is not trained at all. You know, you don't really know what to expect or what -- or how to act or react. I assume that's -- you're about talking some type of program that would guide families on an as-needed basis or would it be something more proactive where every service member would be provided -- their family would have that type of advice available? What do you envision there?

SGT. KAPLAN:

I think it's maybe a combination of both. And I want to explain to you, if you can just give me a -- I'll tell you two quick stories. Anybody in the military will tell you, you go from being a regular guy like myself working to a Reservist, being on full time, the military is going to make a mistake with your pay. Okay? It's just -- it's a guarantee. Now, when my pay checks were half, when I first left, where was my wife going to turn? I couldn't contact her on a regular basis while I was in training. She had nowhere to turn. She couldn't call Department of Finance because they would not speak to her, even though she had a Power of Attorney. So, I'm thinking on those lines. If there was some sort of outreach program, somewhere maybe in the VA, and it's just hypothetically here, someone that knows the system and that she can call and say *I'm having a pay issue, what do*

I do? And they would be able to get in touch with maybe someone at finance that would be able to help her out or some sort of advocate that would be able to speak on soldiers, or military personnel, on their behalf with some finance.

Another quick story, not to be overdramatic but there was a couple of times when I thought some experiences overseas *wow, I'm not going home* in an instant. And my first thought was *what is my wife going to do when those people show up in those Class A uniforms, how is she going to react?* She's not educated. She has not been told what to do, who to see, what papers go where, this that and the other. And it petrified me. It petrified me that she was alone holding the bag. And I know there's one percent -- I believe it's one percent of the United State's population has served wearing this uniform. It's a lot of people. People say, *oh, one percent, it's not a lot of people.* It's a lot of people. And there's a lot of family members that are left holding the bag. The emotional, financial, everything, that baggage. And what do they do with it? How do they process it? Who's going to teach them? And that's what I'd really like to see happen.

LEG. D'AMARO:

All right. I find it disappointing that there's -- you would think common sense would just dictate that there would be something like that in place already, given the fact that we're fighting now on so many fronts and the deployments, as the Chair pointed out, is, you know, you can be deployed and then redeployed and then redeployed again. And families are coping with the absence of the soldier. So that's a very difficult situation. It just amazes me that there's not something in place to handle something as basic as that.

I don't know that Suffolk County is in a position to provide that, but it's something that we would certainly think through to see if maybe there's some existing organization like you had mentioned even through the VA -- well, that would be federal, but somehow, someway to suggest that type of program or, I don't know that the County has the ability to do that within itself, but perhaps partnering with a not-for-profit organization or something like that might be helpful. And certainly we can have a dialogue about that.

So, again, I appreciate you bringing that to our attention. And, again, I just want to thank you as you people always do and rightfully so for your service to the country, for our country. I have to say that, you know, I get up every day and I think about, you know, my problems and the things that we have to deal with in life. But when a gentleman such as yourself comes to a Committee like this and sits before us and talks about experiences, fighting in a real war, it, again, just pales in comparison to what we go through on a daily basis. And I feel that you should know that. Thank you.

SGT. KAPLAN:

Thank you, sir.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

To pick up on what Legislator D'Amaro was saying, you would think that fighting on so many fronts for such a long extended period of time, that these kinds of services being offered to our military families would certainly be common sense; particularly from a geographic location standpoint. The Director points this out often. We don't have a military base. Our families don't live next door to each other and don't have that natural built-in community to rely on. Our active service members for the most part in our area are Reserve and Guard and they're coming from all different walks of life. It's a much different type of a situation across the country where you have, you know, the large military bases and the permanent military installations that they have families to rely on, they have various experiences that they can draw from. It's a very different situation here in Suffolk County and on Long Island.

So I would ask the Director with what we've heard, you know, maybe you can give us an idea as to what our current status is and ability to offer those kinds of services. And perhaps as a starting point, anyway, the kinds of things that we can and should be doing in order to meet that need.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, I'd first like to say that I appreciate everything that the Sergeant has said. And I must say I was a little bit impressed while I was sitting in the back as this discussion was taking place, as I was making my notes, the Chairman and Sergeant Kaplan were tracking almost right on to what I was writing down, the comments and the responses that I was going to have, you guys were hitting them spot on. So that made me feel good.

To touch on the Sergeant's point, when you leave, when you're deployed, and this goes to a point that I think I had made earlier, that sense, that feeling that emotion that occurs when -- in your instance when your wife dropped you off at Laguardia Airport and, you know, thinking about the ride home and what each following day was going to bring, it's really -- it's not something that is easily described. It's surreal. It's really other worldly, because no matter how much you anticipate it and think that you can prepare for it, until you're in that moment, you don't get it. You just don't get it. You don't know what that is when you know that you're going away and you're leaving people behind, whether it's a mom or a brother and a sister or a sweet heart or a wife or children, it just -- it hits you like a ton of bricks emotionally and psychologically. And that's important because when those issues are not addressed upfront, the soldier carries that baggage over to where he's going.

And one of our big concerns is that regardless of your branch of service, we refer to it as the sandbox. But when you get overseas, when you go into a hostile area, when you go into a combat zone, I don't want our soldiers having thoughts in the back of their mind, *oh, Gees, I wonder if that LIPA bill got paid or I know when I was leaving the car payment was behind, I hope she caught up on that.* We need you 100% operational, not with these thoughts about what's going on at home and *I didn't leave her with a list of phone numbers, not because I didn't think of it, but because there was no list of phone numbers to leave her,* you know, who does she turn to, who does she call? These are very, very real problems. We try very hard. We participate as frequently or as regularly as we can in pre-deployment briefings. And they're great. We meet a lot of people. We touch a lot of folks and we sit down with wives and parents and children and we get a lot of information out there.

The thing about the pre-deployment briefings is we need to be aware of them. We need to know about them. We have to be invited before we can attend. And going back to the reference to being dropped off at Laguardia Airport, this is a onesie. We're deploying guys -- men and women in onesies and twosies. They're leaving as individuals or as two or three folks, and not en masse. It's not like they got onto a transport with 230 other people and everybody shared similar concerns and you can sort of communicate and brainstorm and say, *listen, here's my number, have your wife call my wife* or, you know. That isn't happening. That doesn't exist. When I deployed, when I was going overseas, it was a little bit different. We were already deployed not related to where we ultimately wound up going. But we were already overseas. And we found out in the middle of what we were doing that we were going to be stopping the mission that we had deployed for and we were going somewhere else, to a hostile area.

And, you know, while we shared many of the same concerns with our family because our role, our mission had changed so abruptly, you know, we went from, *oh, boy, looking forward to the next Port-of-call* to *oh, gees, what's going to happen next,* we had the benefit of -- you know, in my case I was on a ship, I had the benefit of having 300 plus other sailors who shared similar concerns that you could sit down over a meal or over a cup of coffee and discuss, you know, how can we as a group communally address these concerns? It doesn't exist anymore. It doesn't happen. And when you get overseas, you're not likely to find another guy who lives in Huntington or Medford or Nissequogue. You're not going to find it. These guys are from Podunk, Iowa and, you know, out west and everywhere else, you can't walk down the street and knock on the door of one of their family members so it's a big, big issue.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:

Can I just interrupt you --

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Certainly.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:

-- with something? There was a captain who lives in my district who -- he was in the Reserves. And then when the war started he was called up. And I receive a postcard from overseas in my office. I didn't know him. And his postcard was, you know, I'm always so impressed by you guys who are out there in harm's way and your concern is about how is your wife doing with everything. And when I got this, I remember reading it and crying because he was so worried about his wife. They had two young children. And I called her. And this came so out of the blue to her.

She said "who are you?" And I read her the postcard. And I asked her to let me know if she needed anything and asked how I could help. And just mentioned to her a daycare center that I knew that had reduced rates for military -- deployed military. You know, Tutor Time had instituted military rates as their way to help families and people who are in combat. But I didn't know, you know, where to take it. So I'm really glad that you brought this up because maybe just setting up a support system, support groups, like volunteers. I don't know, Tom.

SGT. KAPLAN:

Can I add something to that if you don't mind? It can start as small as someone like me volunteering their services. I happen to be a Human Resource Specialist in the Army. So I know a lot of the do's and don't's, I know where to go, I know who to talk to in reference to pay problems or whatever kind of problems. So, I mean, listen, Mr. Stern, I've been talking to Mrs. Harris there for nearly five years now. Even if it was something that was generated out of your office, *hey, Mike, you know, this family is having a little bit of trouble. Can you go visit them?* I'll be glad to. So even if it started as a volunteer thing like that, I would be more than happy to. I just wanted to add that. It was a perfect caveat for what you were just saying. Thank you, ma'am.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Going back to the original point, it is important that we recognize the need for this support on a local level. The family readiness groups are tremendous. They're a wonderful resource, but, again, they're unit-specific. And, you know, should somebody from another unit contact a representative of a family readiness or a family support group, they're not going to hang up on them. They'll speak to them. They'll say, listen, try calling so and so. But they're not necessarily able to welcome you into their group because it is unit-specific. These families have a core mission. And it does not include outsiders. And that's wrong. But at the same time it's entirely understandable.

So we, again, and I would encourage -- and, you know, again, we rely on folks like Sergeant Kaplan to get this word out. We encourage, we really hope that folks would contact us, call our offices. We're not going to solve all of these problems. We simply can't. But we do have some resources. We can point people in directions. And we're all veterans. So to that end we all kind of get it. When you contact our office, all of our accredited service officers by statute have to be veterans. So we help to the extent that we are able.

We have been working on a couple different programs. And it's funny, one of the things you had talked about is, you know, getting together and having a meal or doing something, looking that, and I gave Debbie in the packet of copies that I had asked to be made, we've been talking for a longtime about the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency, Veterans Discount Program for merchants and vendors and business owners in the County. We've been approaching many -- the TGI Fridays and the Applebee's and the smaller merchants. And that's one of the things we would love to be able to do is have a restaurant give us, you know, a noon to 1:30 window where we can invite the family members and have some representatives there who can give them solid information, tangible, useful stuff that, you know, leaving that event they would be able to refer to a list of telephone numbers or a list of contacts.

One source, again, it's good to the extent that it was intended. You have Operation Yellow Ribbon. It's great. But, again, all these programs are based on unit participation, not the individual soldiers. When you deploy and return, you know, as one, two, three soldiers, they're not going to roll out Operation Yellow Ribbon for one guy coming home; not going to happen. And that's a tragedy because those are useful programs. And they, you know, they get all of the families together and they shell you off to some great resort Upstate for a few days and everybody, you know, plays volleyball and you have workshops and you reconnect with your families, but you learn a lot about what's available. We're not seeing it. We don't get it out here because we don't have the unit level deployments that those programs are geared toward addressing.

Again, the family readiness and family support groups, the Sergeant is absolutely right. Generally speaking it's going to be the wife of a senior officer, typically the commanding officer or the unit executive officer who runs it. And just by virtue of what the military culture is, he hit it right now, the minutia is not necessarily going to trickle down. And while something that you convey to me might seem insignificant, to the person conveying it, it's a big deal. It's a big deal. You know, the children are not coping well or we need this. And if it doesn't trickle down to the folks who are able to do something about it, it's a tragedy because it's a failing of the system. And we're all part of that system. We need to do a better job.

To that end I would encourage, again, please contact our offices because we do have access to more resources than most places that you're going to reach out to. And, you know, we have relationships with a lot of folks who you might not otherwise be able to access. So I think communicating with us is important. You know, there are programs out there where, again, if we don't know who you are, we can't do anything about it. But there are programs out there where if the spouse is having a difficult -- little things like something as minor as cutting the grass or repairing a broken window or nailing that step down on the porch that's coming loose, you know, any number of things, we have folks out there who are doing these things. But I don't know that your furnace isn't making heat if you don't call us and tell us that your furnace isn't making heat. We can't send somebody if we don't know the problem is there. And it should be much more organized and it should be done on a military initiative, but it is not. So to the extent that we're able, we're trying to pick up the slack on that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And, Director, to the extent that it's not handled in an appropriate way, a meaningful way at the military level, at the VA level, do you just in the large sense, do you agree that in some way that it is the kind of service that we can and should be offering on a County level? Is it the kind of thing that, if not solely, certainly be a part of in offering to our veterans and their families?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I think that we do a great deal on the County level. Certainly we can always be doing more. One of the problems is, again, it goes back to we don't know what we don't know. And if we don't know that you're out there, we don't know that you need these services, and if you're not aware that we're out here offering these services, we're not helping the people who need it.

So I think really what we need to do is further enhance -- we have a network already existing. But I guess to further enhance the network that we presently have. And we work with the towns and we try to get the word out.

One of the great resources that I would always encourage family members to communicate with while their loved ones are deployed are the local community based veteran service organizations, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legions, the Amvets, etcetera. Most of them have auxiliaries. And while maybe the core organization isn't going to be what that family member is looking for, the auxiliaries are geared more toward the provision of services, making sure that the lights stay on, do you need groceries, those sorts of things. So the auxiliaries are a valuable resource, but a lot of people, again, don't realize that they're out there. Huntington has many, Islip

has many, Brookhaven has many.

But, again, it's tough. Only up until a couple of years ago the DOD and the VA did not allow anybody who wasn't DOD or VA to have access to the identities of our soldiers both in uniform and deployed, whether they're home or deployed. About three years ago we were finally able to access something known as the RONA list. And it's great. It gives us a great deal of information, it help us communicate. The problem with the RONA list is we've done mailings with it. It's a difficult thing to access. The feds are very close fistted when it comes to sharing this type of information for very good reasons; not only for privacy but for operational security reasons. If I give you the names of 400 men in X battalion who are deploying, if the wrong person finds out that 400 guys in battalion X are deploying, they can use that information. So the government is rightfully restrictive on who they share that information with.

The problem is when we've done mailings using that list, the return rate on the mailings has been averaging about 35 percent, which is huge. So a lot of that information is just not useable. It's not current. And we don't get a strong response from the other 65 percent. There's a lot going on. You know, we're working on it.

One of the other things that we've done a little bit of work on, and I'm hopeful that going forward we'll be able to do a better job of, is getting the schools involved. You know, the children of our deployed service members are experiencing things that, you know, just by -- they're children. They don't necessarily know how to communicate to us as parents, as other family members what their concerns and what their issues are. Maybe they don't recognize them themselves. But if we're able to get the schools and the teachers and providers more engaged and more educated, I think, we would be providing a huge service. And, again, that's something we've been working on. We're intending to go forward and work harder on that over the summer.

My wife is committed -- she is a school teacher -- to helping come up with plans and figuring out ways to execute these and getting to the superintendents of the districts to allow us in. But, the Sergeant makes a great point. The work does need to be done and we need to figure out better ways of doing it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you, Sergeant.

SGT. KAPLAN:

Hypothetical, real quick, I know I'm taking up a lot of everyone's time. Just a hypothetical: An Amvet Hall, a local Amvet Hall, if they did a buffet and invited family members, if we could identify units that are deployed at this very time, an Amvet Hall could do a buffet maybe once every three or four months during the deployment. I know they can write off that -- write off that type of money expenditure for one evening. And you can have -- you know, you would welcome the families there, have some representatives from maybe the Red Cross there to discuss certain things; someone like me that could ask family members, while I'm in uniform, *what does your son or husband do over there?* And I'd be able to share with them exactly what they might be experiencing over there. I've been there twice. My son has been there once. He's about ready to go to Afghanistan in a couple of months. So I know what it's about. And I know it's going to be kind of like a think tank sort of -- how we would be able to accomplish this. But just to I give you an idea, something like that, where are your thoughts on that possibly.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Well, that is among many of the important ideas that we've discussed today, something that we need to continue and we need to continue that discussion now. And so I look forward to working with you, with our Director, with my colleagues to develop a program, a system here in Suffolk County to best serve our veterans and their families, in the particular circumstances that you described.

You know, I say this often, the County level of government, we don't make decisions regarding war and peace. That is not our responsibility. But it is our responsibility to ensure that we do all we can for our active service members, for our veterans and their families. That is our responsibility here locally. And so, yeah, we'll continue to have that conversation and develop meaningful ideas. I look forward to it.

Sergeant, your service is not only remarkable, but your willingness to continue your service here for your veterans, for their families, for our entire community here at home is just as remarkable. I'm sure my colleagues would agree we can say dozens of things. But let me say just very simply and sincerely thank you.

SGT. KAPLAN:

You're welcome. Thank you very much.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I want to make one last point then I'll stop. The Sergeant made a point that one percent of Americans have worn the uniform. The County of Suffolk is proud to say that eleven percent of our residents are veterans. So while nationally the number is one percent that has worn the uniform, here in Suffolk County our number is eleven percent. I think that speaks strongly to the level of service and commitment and patriotism here in the County.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director, thank you so much. And your family who join you here today, again, thank you and, of course, most importantly welcome home.

SGT. KAPLAN:

Thank you.

APPLAUSE

INTRODUCTORY RESOLUTIONS

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. We have an item on our agenda, which has a new title. It is **IR 1559-2011: Establishing a Veterans Honor Roll at the Veterans Plaza in Raynor Beach County Park and Recognizing Robert J. Molinari as its First Honoree (Kennedy)**. This needs to be considered by the Sitings Committee that is coming up. But I will offer a motion to discharge without recommendation and send it through to the full Legislature. And by the time we meet the Sitings Committee will have had the opportunity to have met.

D.P.O. VILORIA-FISHER:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Second by the Deputy Presiding Officer. All in favor? Any Opposed? Any abstention? **IR 1559 is discharged without recommendation. (VOTE: 3-0-0-2. LEGISLATORS ROMAINE AND ANKER ABSENT)**

Okay, Legislators Romaine and Anker were not with us today. They have excused absences. Everybody else good? Okay, very good. Thank you.

**THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 12:58 PM
{ } DENOTES SPELLED PHONETICALLY**