

**VETERANS & SENIORS COMMITTEE**

**of the**

**SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE**

**VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT**

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 November 28, 2011.

**MEMBERS PRESENT:**

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

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:**

Barbara LoMoriello, Deputy Clerk  
Laura Halloran, Budget Review Office  
Eric A. Kopp, County Executive's Office  
Deborah Harris, Aide to Leg. Stern  
Ali Nazir, Aide to Legislator Kennedy  
Tom Ronayne, Director, Veterans Service Agency  
John Mauro, Commander, Suffolk County VFW  
Linda Mitchell, Director of Member Services, Huntington Township Chamber of Commerce  
Rich Meyer, AME Legislative Representative  
And all other interested parties

**VERBATIM MINUTES TAKEN BY:**

Lucia Braaten, Court Stenographer

**(\*THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 11:37 A.M. \*)**

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Good morning, everyone. Welcome to the committee on Veterans and Seniors. I'm going to ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance, led by Legislator Anker.

**(\*Salutation\*)**

I'd ask everyone to please remain standing for a moment of silence as we keep all our brave men and women fighting for our freedoms overseas in our thoughts and in our prayers.

**(\*Moment of Silence\*)**

Good morning, everyone. And I'm going to go to public portion. I have one card, Mr. John Mauro --

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

He's going to join me.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

-- who's going to come up with the Director. So, I'll call up the Director. Tom, we'll start with you guys.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committee. Thank you again for the invitation to appear before you. I hope you all had an enjoyable and safe Thanksgiving.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you. You, too.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I've got a few things that I wanted to just touch on this morning. As no great surprise, I will begin with my staffing. We still have great concerns as to what the impact will be of losing the staff that we are still slated to lose. As we see -- please, pardon me. As we see the numbers of veterans that we're serving continue to increase, it has not been a strained, but it's certainly been a full-time effort to maintain the numbers of veterans who come in for our services. As I stated the last time I attended session, our numbers are up from last year by about 4.3%, which in the grand scheme may not seem like a great deal, but, clearly, we -- our numbers are ticking up. If we lose personnel and those numbers continue to increase, obviously, our ability to provide services at the level that we believe that we should be delivering services will be impacted. This does not even factor the effect that the demobilization of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will have with regard to returning service members who will be seeking services, both at V.A. and through our agency. So the concern is great.

We're seeing needs -- pardon me -- that are genuine and need to be addressed, and without our ability to meet with these individuals in a timely fashion, process their claims and prosecute them effectively on behalf of these veterans, these folks are in for a hard time. There are a great many veterans returning now with disabilities. The proportions of veterans returning with disabilities is actually greater now than it has been in any of the wars that we've prosecuted in our nation's past. So both physical and what we call closed head wounds, PTSD, TBI, and other psychological issues that are plaguing our returning service members.

As these folks return home, as these service members return home and we both -- even if we were to be able to maintain the level of services that we're presently delivering, my concern is that, given the nature of the economy, compounded by the numbers of returning service members, we have

concerns that we will be seeing increases in other areas. Certainly, veterans who are unemployed, depending upon the numbers that you read -- and, Legislator Anker, I know that I had promised you a report on some numbers. I had intended to have that report with me this morning, it's in my car. My car is not with me, I had car trouble this morning, but I do have that report for you. It will be e-mailed to the committee today. And I think the numbers will help bear out some of what I'm telling you. When these individuals are returning home, obviously, with unemployment being one of the great concerns, they are left to, you know, find other means to help them, help them get by. We're concerned that we will continue to see increases in the numbers of veterans who are seeking services through the Department of Social Services, both for financial assistance and housing assistance, which is fine. And I understand that that is why DSS is there, and they do a wonderful job of providing those services. When it comes to veterans, unique to the veteran population, we can do it better. We have resources available to us that are veteran-specific that would simply better serve the veterans in need of these programs.

If I can get away from the obligation and the responsibility part of it for a moment, if I look at it from a purely administrative or business perspective, a lot of the services that we provide are Federally funded. If I can divert a veteran who seeks services and take him off of the County dime and have the Feds pick up the tab, it's a win all around. Not only are we providing what we should be, not only are we helping the veteran, but we're also providing an added service to the County taxpayer by not using County dollars for services that we can otherwise deliver. Another area -- and, again, I think the unemployment will be a factor in this. And I'm not sure how to quantify this. I intend to ask for meetings with both the Police and Sheriff's Departments in the near future, because the incidents of veterans finding themselves exposed to law enforcement is increasing, and that is multifaceted. There are a number of reasons for that. The PTSD and TBI plays into it, the unemployment plays into it, and there were some other factors that contribute. But these also, A, represent areas where we should not be allowing our veterans to fall into; and B, if we can somehow intercede and prevent them from encountering law enforcement in the first place, we can cause those dollars to not have to be spent incarcerating, prosecuting and otherwise handling veterans issues. Again, we can do it better, but we need to be in there before the problem arises in order to do it better. And with these reductions in staff, my concern is that that will be a far greater and greater challenge going forward.

So, for those reasons, I believe that it is critical that we prepare in advance of the -- what I'm concerned to be an upswing. Again, we don't know what the numbers are, we don't know how many of these veterans we'll be seeing, but, obviously, as we start bringing people home by the tens of thousands from Iraq and then, beginning next year, from Afghanistan, we know that some of them are going to land here in Suffolk County.

Again, I also tried at the last session to make the point that everybody seems very hyper-focused on the numbers. We have the boots on the ground in Iraq and in Afghanistan. The war-fighters represent only a portion, a small portion of the folks fighting these wars. The -- you know, I think Mr. Mauro would agree with me. We used to affectionately refer to them as the guys in the rear with the gear, the support personnel, the supply people, the guys who sit down and place the orders for the bullets, or make sure that we have food being sent in to feed them, and that the vehicles are being built and being maintained, all of these different things, that they have uniforms, and that they have shoes, and all of the things that you don't really think about or consider when you look at the war-fighters. So the guys on the grounds are only a portion of the soldiers or service members who will be affected by these draw-downs. The numbers will be greater than the numbers that you see on the news at night.

To compound this concern, as I reported, and I think I had forwarded to the Chairman a copy of an E-mail that I had received after our last committee identifying some concerns at the New York Regional Office, where the majority of the claims for veterans that we prepare and submit. Before they're prosecuted and decided, are sent, they go to the New York Regional Office.

The Department of Veterans Affairs, Inspector General's Office recently did an inspection at the New York Regional Office and found several areas of concern. One of those areas of concern, and the Regional Office Director has agreed that this is a problem, is the level of training of the people who rate the claims that come into the office. All of these people are relatively new based on a shift in personnel several years ago when they attempted to increase the numbers of people rating these claims. As of now, the regional office has a backlog -- a backlog of in excess of 16,000 claims. Those are folders sitting on desks that have not been opened yet, have not been looked at, have not been reviewed or had any action taken on them. We have a total of thirteen people rating these 16,000-plus folders that are waiting to be rated.

One of the problems that we see in the short term is the Regional Office has conceded that the folks who are reading or rating these folders need to have additional training. In order to train them they have to be taken out of the regional office and sent to training, which will take them offline for a period of time. Thereby, we'll have fewer people rating an increasing number of claims going forward. The backlog is tremendous; it's only getting worse. As we begin to bring more and more veterans homes, we're going to see greater and greater numbers of cases waiting to be ruled on.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Can I ask a question just very quickly?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Please.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Just to clarify. This backlog of 16,000 applications, what office is the backlog in?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

The New York Regional Office in Manhattan. That's where the majority of claims originating from Suffolk County are submitted.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Oh, okay. So when claims come into the County, they're first sent to the Regional Office, which is a State office?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well, it would be the Federal office. It would be the Department of Veterans Affairs.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Oh. Well, that's what I'm asking.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

And they receive claims not only from Suffolk County, but from --

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

They receive what? I'm sorry?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

They receive claims not only from Suffolk --

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Not only from Suffolk.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

-- County, but from a large portion of the northeast region.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Right. So there's a backlog of 16,000 Suffolk County applications with the Federal Review Office?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

No, that's a back -- that backlog is a total number.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

What's the total number of County applications that are awaiting review; do you know?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

It's in excess of a thousand. I can get a better number for you.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Okay.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

We do track those, but we've got a great many -- a great many pending.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

And despite the backlog of, let's say, a thousand, roughly, cases that need to be reviewed first by the Federal Government, the Federal level, the VA, there is still a backlog in our own office?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

We generally are getting claims out within 30 days. That is our goal from the time a veteran comes in, unless there's some circumstance that we generally are not able to anticipate, or if there's some unusual component to the claim. We try to get the claims out within 30 days of the veteran presenting.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Now, there's -- all right. So thirty days. How does that square with -- you initially began your comments concerning the staffing levels in the office, but, yet, you're saying we get them out in 30 days. Am I mixing apples and oranges here?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

No. At this time, we're still making the 30 days, but, again, it's requiring that we -- one example would be that we for a very long time had always entertained walk-in clients. A veteran could come in and ask to meet with a counselor and we would sit them down and to the best of our ability in that first meeting meet with them. We're no longer able to do that. We now require that veterans call ahead and make appointments. If they come in without an appointment, we, unfortunately, cannot see them, generally speaking. There have been exceptions, but generally speaking, we have to make them commit to an appointment time and return at a future date.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

So the staffing concerns are more in anticipation of the increased volume you're expecting.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Largely. We are seeing some impact now.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

There are issues now, I understand, walk-ins, for example. But you're still progressing claims in a 30-day window. So you're very much concerned about an increase in volume coming in.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Yes, I am. And as I stated earlier, we have -- we ran the numbers about six weeks ago and our numbers for the past 12 months are up 4.3%, so there is an increase. We have a quantifiable

number of cases that we are seeing an increase as. Compound that with the -- you know, the potential loss of staff. If the increase in the numbers of claims that we are seeing continues, and I anticipate that it will, given the fact that we now have the East End facility operating. We have the clinic in Riverhead opening.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Do you know what staff you would need to retain in order to meet the anticipated increase in demand next year?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well, I will say that we were originally slated to lose a veteran service officer, our management technician, who, amongst his other responsibilities, is largely responsible for working our programs, our homeless veterans stand-downs, our employment fairs, our incarcerated veteran program. He is slated to be lost. I have been advocating for over a year now, probably closer to two years, to increase the number of veteran service officers on staff to be able to maintain the level of services that we are delivering. So my projections had been that we should be adding at least one. And by losing people, we're going to compound the problem of being able -- being able to deal with the increase in numbers as they occur.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

So adding at least one would help to address what you're anticipating, as far as increased caseload and not processing claims within a 30-day period?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Yes, it would help. And I should also add that in addition to the staff that I'm slated to lose, we also have our -- the senior person in Riverhead, in the Riverhead office, retiring on March 1st, and we will --

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Yeah, you had mentioned that last time, I believe, yeah.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Yeah. So, you know, typically, when a new service officer comes in, by law, he is not allowed to represent clients until he has achieved an accreditation.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Tom, let me ask you --

**MR. RONAYNE:**

That process takes about a year.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Okay.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

So it's about a year before we can really let a veteran service officer sit with a client on his own and actually initiate a claim. When Mr. Hopkins retires in March, in a perfect world I'd be able to replace him immediately. That person would still not be up to speed for a year. There's a training and a learning curve that has to take place. So I would anticipate that with his retirement, that would further compound the problem of being able to address the veterans' claims as they're presented to us based on the staffing and the type of staffing that we have.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Sounds to me like that should be anticipated now and the training should begin now to -- for the replacement in March.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I can't train anybody until I can hire somebody for the position.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Okay, fair enough.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

I am told I can't hire anybody until the position is vacated.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Right. Let me ask you this, last question. If your staffing does not change in 2012, what do you anticipate being the time frame for responding or processing claims? We're now at about a 30-day period, you said. Where do you think that goes?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

If I maintain the levels as they presently are?

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Yeah, if we make no change.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I would like to say that I would want to be able to maintain that 30-day threshold. I don't know that we would, given the numbers that we're -- the actual increases that we're presently seeing. I think realistically, we'll probably be moving that to a 45-day window. Our goal would always be to maintain the 30. I don't know that that is a reality going forward as the --

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

What does that mean to the returning veteran, that increase of 15 days?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well, every day that the claim is not filed is a day longer that it takes for it to be rated, as the time for claims to be processed and rated has been increasing. Right now, we're -- depending on the nature of the claim, they run between six and twelve months, averaging eight to nine months. If we have a longer window from the time the veteran comes in until we can submit that claim, obviously, it will delay the amount of time before a decision is made on that claim. And if at the same time the backlog or the number of claims being seen at the regional office increases, that backlog would increase. So it would have a net impact on the decision being made and the veteran receiving relief or not receiving relief.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Are your numbers available monthly as far as response time to claims?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

They are.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

They are?

**MR. RONAYNE:**

They are. In fact, we report monthly to the New York State Division of Veterans Affairs where everything is documented.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Right. And right now you're about 30 days.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Right now, we're at about 30 days.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Okay. Well, I appreciate your testimony. And I think everyone, everyone wants to process those claims as quick as possible. It's the least we could do for returning servicemen and women. So I would be interested in staying very focused on those numbers as we go into the new year if no changes are made.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I appreciate your interest, I appreciate your questions. And going forward, the concern, as we continue to see an increase in the numbers of our veterans, the problems that they're presenting with are becoming more and more challenging, and one of them -- and I'm glad that Commander Mauro -- John Mauro is the Commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Suffolk, Suffolk County Council -- recently contacted me with a situation that we're beginning to see somewhat more of, and that was specifically an Iraq or Afghanistan veteran, who in this case was a single parent, he had children. We have the ability to house a lot of veterans when it comes to homelessness or certain types of placement issues. When it comes to veterans with spouses or veterans with children, we are really at a loss. We have very, very few resources available, and we're seeing more and more of those problems. And I'm concerned that this is just one of many types of situations that we're going to be seeing that we're presently, not necessarily as a County, but just in general, in the veterans services community. We're ill-prepared for this particular type of problem because of the nature of the delivery of services.

There's a saying in our -- if you will, in our business. We always fight our last war. You know, World War II came along, we fought what we had -- the planners had always anticipated another World War I, so we thought that's what we would have. Korea, Vietnam, we always fight our last war. Well, the wars that we're fighting now are no different. And as our soldiers are returning home, one of the things that we're seeing is the survivability. We've got a great many more wounded and injured soldiers returning home because of the survivability of the equipment and the protection, the body armor, the vehicles, and so forth, that they travel in, but they're surviving with different injuries. And again, many of them, you know, the amputations and the physical injuries are one, but the one that we're most challenged by are the psychological, the PTSD, the TBI.

A lot of these guys can't hold jobs. A lot of them don't function cognitively at a level that allows them to lead normal lives. And they very often are finding themselves -- these are the guys that we're starting to see encountering law enforcement. They're going out and getting themselves arrested for any number of reasons. They're homeless because they can't find employment or they can't maintain employment. And, unfortunately, given the nature of the wars that we're fighting, because so many of them are National Guard and Reserves, a lot of these are not the younger -- you know, we used to think of the soldiers as these 18, 19, 20-year-old people who would enlist and go into service. These are people with established families, established careers who have been members of National Guard for a long time and have been activated to fight these wars. So they're coming home with these problems and they've got families, they've got careers that they can't return to.

The impact on the families has been tremendous. But when John approached me concerning this individual with the children, the first three questions that we ask, because of the nature of the housing that we have available, if you can believe, is largely does the individual have an alcohol abuse problem, does the individual have a substance abuse problem, or does the individual have a serious mental illness or an SMI. If you don't have one of those problems, the numbers of available beds that we have to send these individuals to is extremely limited. And again, when you factor in families or children, they're almost nonexistent. And our goal -- again, DSS is a resource, we work very closely with them, and they do wonderful work with us in providing services, but our goal is to

not have our veterans go into the DSS stream for a number of reasons. And again, if you will, you know, for this discussion, if it's purely for the economics, if we can avoid the expense to the County taxpayer, we would like to do so, at the same time, delivering a superior product or a better benefit.

So these are all -- these are all serious concerns. I know that I've shared this all with you before. I don't mean to be redundant, but it's a matter that I believe is serious enough that I need to continue to bring it to your attention and make sure that if there are any questions, that I leave -- don't leave them outstanding and that I paint a clear picture for you of what it is that I anticipate going forward.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Anker.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Thank you, Tom, for again coming here and addressing us and enlightening us on these issues. Can we -- what can we do to facilitate or expedite those claims? I'm thinking right now maybe if our committee writes a letter, we sign it. Is there anything we can do in the County level to nudge them to expedite their jobs?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well, on a local level, the only thing that we can do is ensure that we operate our Veterans Service Agency at the most efficient, most optimal level that we're able and that is -- that's a function of staff. When it comes to processing the claims as they're received in the Regional Office in New York City, that's a function of the Federal Government and that would be something that if the committee could compose a letter or somehow construct a communication with our Congressional delegation to emphasize to them our concerns. They're not strangers to this issue, but I think it would be important for us to be on record with them that this is an issue that we take seriously and that we will continue to take seriously, and any advocacy that we can provide to advance our cause into the regional office. Again, the function -- I think the short answer to the solution in the regional office is staffing. You need well-trained staff to address the needs of the workload, and right now they don't have that.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Did you say it was thirteen staff to review 16,000 applications? That's ridiculous.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Yes, that's correct.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

And it should be unacceptable to all of us. Legislator Romaine.

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

Yes, Mr. Chairman, you make an excellent point. It may be worthy of you drafting a letter to our two United States Senators and the two Congressmen that represent Suffolk County indicating that it is unacceptable, and asking for their intercession to see what they can do to put some pressure on the current administration in Washington to adequately staff the VA so that they have sufficient screeners. You may want to consider doing that. I certainly would be happy to sign such a letter, because, as you say, 16,000 applicants and thirteen people review them, and every day, new applicant -- new applications come in, you know.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

And I can almost guarantee there's more than thirteen a day coming in, so --

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

Yeah, yeah. So, I mean, clearly, that backlog will grow. And I would suggest that the committee

send a letter, and maybe you wish to draft it on our behalf. I certainly be willing to send a letter that would call to our Federal delegation's attention some of the problems with the Regional Office, firstly.

Secondly, and this is a question for Tom, the VA, the Federal Government, do they ever enter into, or do they have grant programs, or programs where they would enter into a partnership with local government in terms of providing family housing, housing for children, and maybe single parents, housing for, you know, families with children? Is that something that is currently being offered by the Federal Government?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

VA does have some programs along the lines that you're saying, but, again, most of them, the grant and per diem, some of the other programs, have that requirement that there be an alcohol, substance abuse or serious mental illness for the majority of the applicants to qualify for that housing.

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

So what you're saying is it's difficult to get a square peg into a round hole.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well said.

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

Okay.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

The need exists. I think it's a matter of refining the existing policies to allow for the folks who most need this housing. There is a need, don't get me wrong, there is a need for the SMIs and the alcohol and the substance abuse people out there, and that need is -- they're doing a fair job of meeting that need. This dynamic of the new returning service members with family members and children is something that we need to wrap our minds around as government and figure out a way of providing these resources to the folks who need them, because the need is only growing. And the impact on the families is devastating to begin with, and when you take all of the other problems that they're faced with and now they're homeless and we can't find someplace for them to go, it's a serious problem.

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

Well, let me make a suggestion to you. Unfortunately, sometimes the Federal Government, because of its size and because of its scope, doesn't provide all the programs necessary to meet the needs of returning veterans, particularly those that have families or are single parents with children that are homeless. We do in this County still have an amount of money for an affordable housing program. Maybe if we combined our efforts with Nassau County, work with the State of New York, we could find on County or State land, suitable to construct affordable housing, which we could make available to veterans with families, or single parents who are veterans that have returned.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

We actually did something along those lines a couple of years ago under the 72-h Program where we identified housing that the County would come into possession of as the result largely of either tax liens or foreclosures, that when those properties were to be turned over, whether to not-for-profits or the towns, that there would be a preference, there would be a set-aside for veterans to go into those homes. That program presently exists. Unfortunately --

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

I know, he just -- I think the Town of Brookhaven did a house in Sound Beach recently.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Sound Beach, yes.

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

But I'm talking about a multi-family housing, where we build 15, 20 units. Maybe we'd build it on State grounds, maybe at Farmingdale or one of the State Universities, or on County grounds where we have accessibility. Maybe we build it in Yaphank, but where we could provide that type of housing and maybe get some assistance from the VA in constructing that housing. It would certainly put a lot of our construction trades to work. It would certainly provide -- fill a gaping need. Maybe we can work with our sister county, because maybe there's only 20 or 30 or 40 families that this affected and we could probably build enough units to meet some of that demand.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well, there is a program or, I should say, a contract in place at this time related to the facility in Amityville, the old military reserve center, the Army -- the Navy and Marine Corps Reserve Center. Concern for Independent Living has been selected as the developer and they're in the process of now of trying to secure the grants required to go ahead and begin construction.

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

But, again, that's not for families?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well, that will -- there will be a total of 60 units, forty-eight for individuals --

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

Okay.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

-- and 12 for families.

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

Oh, okay.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

But that's a year or two down the line.

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

Right.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

You know, there is inventory out there that if we, I guess, were to be a little creative, maybe if we had to think outside of the box, it would be -- we're in a tough economy, we all know that. It would be a wonderful thing, not only for the veterans to receive the housing, but, as you said, the tradesmen, the construction folks, the people who supply the materials. And, you know, there would be a number of benefits to something like that. It's a matter of identifying the inventory available to us and being able to move forward with that.

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

Well, the other possibility is expanding the inventory available to us. With our affordable housing money, certainly there's so many foreclosures that are owned by banks. So we could go to a bank and say, "Look, give us some scattered-site foreclosures, we'll buy in bulk, we'll buy 10 or 15 homes. We want the biggest discount you can, because you already wrote off the loans as bad loans. Make a deal with us, we'll close. We'll enter into contracts with the construction trades, and we'll start rehabbing these." And surely, but -- slowly, but surely, we will have housing units available that we can make available to them. The County would own them, but they would be

available to the veterans at limited or no cost, depending on their circumstance. And we've done something very good in that case. We've taken a rundown house that's foreclosed, that's probably been vandalized, or whatever, we fixed it up, we benefitted the neighborhood. We've turned around a street that had -- any street that has a foreclosure affects all the other housing properties. We've made some housing available. It's owned by the County. If these people get their lives back together and capable of moving on, then the house becomes available for the next veteran to go through.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

And there are models like that out there. In New York City, for years I know they've had a "Cop on the Block" program, or a "Fireman on the Block," or a "Teacher on the Block." You know, I'm speaking -- maybe I'm biased, but veterans make good neighbors. I wouldn't mind having one living next door to me. And if there were a vacant home, that --

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

I agree. And if some of my colleagues on this committee agree, maybe we can put together something in Legislative format to get the ball rolling on this. I think it has some merit. And, obviously, before we did that, not only would I want to talk with your office, but I would like to talk with many of the veterans groups out there to solicit their input and their thoughts on this, because there's several ways that you can go on this and I've just suggested two. And I could probably go on, but I don't want to take the committee's time. But, clearly, this might be something that several of the veterans groups, yourself, members of this committee can meet and discuss, because we may be able to put forward a Legislative initiative to get some action on this.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well, I've got Mr. Mauro right here, who is the Commander of the Suffolk County Veterans of Foreign Wars. You know, he's the ranking individual for the Veterans of Foreign Wars as an elected commander, and, you know, they're doing great work, as are so many of the other organizations. But, again, as I stated in the very beginning, this is a need that is going to continue to increase.

Very quickly, just in case anybody is wondering about this. We have in the past spoken about a program that VA has. It is known as the HUD VASH Program. That program exists. It's out there and it's housing veterans. We've got through Northport, in both Nassau and Suffolk in the last couple of years, we've housed about 225 veterans under the HUD VASH Program. I'll make very clear that they've maxed out on their vouchers. They don't have anymore vouchers to house veterans and we still have veterans coming forward presenting for the program. But one of the qualifying criteria for that program is that a veteran must be chronically homeless before he's eligible for the housing under the program. So you've got to have all of your -- you've got to have a world of troubles before we can step up and help you with that program. I think there's somewhere in the middle that we ought to be that allows these guys to not have -- these men and women --

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

It would be a shame to require as a requirement that they must fall into despair first before you can rescue them and provide home. I mean, that's kind of a counterproductive type of program. You would think that if someone is homeless and is a veteran, that would want to address their problem as quickly as possible and not allow that problem to become a chronic problem.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well, to the extent that I am able, anything that I can do, I'm always available in any way, shape or form, if I can contribute to any remedy.

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

I appreciate your input, Tom. Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Presiding Officer.

**P.O. LINDSAY:**

Yeah, just to pick up where Legislator Romaine was going. You know, Legislator Browning has a bill in to address some of these homes that we've -- that have been in foreclosure, that haven't been selling at auction because of this restriction that you have to live in the house for ten years to prevent speculators from coming in, and whatever. Her latest rendition is that she would treat them as 72-h's, turn them over to the Town. She has LIBI, the Long Island Builder's Institute, involved -- have agreed. It's three houses now. They'll rehab it for returning veterans. So, at a very minimal cost, a veteran and his family can own a house that will be rehabbed, will be very livable, and it clears up some of our back-stock. It takes a vacant house out of a neighborhood, which enhances the whole neighborhood. But if this pilot program works with three houses, it's something that could be expanded, I think, to a larger -- because, you know, we're talking about buying property, or whatever. We have a large stock of foreclosed houses because of the economy. We should really leverage that.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Not to mention, we'd have proud veterans happily paying property taxes on those homes, which is not happening now.

**P.O. LINDSAY:**

Not only taxes we're not getting, but as long as that house is vacant, it's costing the County to maintain it. We have to cut the grass, we have to make sure it doesn't fall into disrepair, so it costs us money every year.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Tom, I'm wondering if you or the Commander has an idea as to how many Suffolk County families we might be talking about? I mean, you point to one specific example, but I'm wondering if you have any idea how many families we might be talking about in Suffolk County?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I presently am aware of five or six. Personally, I have not polled my staff individually to see how many clients they have either in this situation. If they're in that situation, I would probably know about it. But, you know, how many of them are at risk? You know, we do have some programs out there that we've been able to utilize. We're not always successful because of the qualifying criteria, but, you know, we've been a little creative in getting some of these individuals into programs, and the programs that they're in are not long-term, they're not permanent solutions. So I would be happy -- it would be my privilege to work with any of you toward, you know, finding a remedy or a solution to this, even if it's -- we're not going to solve all of these problems, but if we can make a dent, we have that responsibility to these folks.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Anker.

**MR. MAURO:**

Basically, you've said it all, Tom. Basically, my comrade, Tom, has said it all. Basically, a lot of these veterans don't know where to go for this advice. We need, counselors, basically, that's what it's all about. We have a lot them falling in the cracks. They don't know like these different programs. They don't know where to go to, so they're frustrated, angry, and then get themselves jammed up. My personal opinion is we need more counselors, and that's my personal opinion. Tom, that's his business, he knows more about it than I do, but that's what we need. They have to have direction where they can go to these programs. The housing program's a great idea, that's an excellent idea, but you're working with the Federal Government. Or you're talking about a County level to do this or --

**LEG. ROMAINE:**

The County can do this.

**MR. MAURO:**

Oh, okay. That's a great idea.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Anker.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

If I could, I know I'm taking a great deal of your time this morning, but, you know, one other thing that has -- it's always eluded me, is, you know, the Federal Government in many areas is able to provide assistance in the form of grants or funding or different programs. Our agency, our departments are not eligible for those types of support. We don't get Federal grants. We don't get Federal program money, except for a small grant for our annual homeless veteran stand-down. And it's always been curious to me as to why, with a need that is so great and that really is so much better administered on a local level, why there isn't some sort of assistance available for us at the county levels to implement programs and to do what we need to do, because a dollar spent here probably saves the Federal Government many dollars down the line, if we can catch the problem before it becomes a problem.

So, again -- and I've spoken to our Congressional representatives about this and, you know, it's just one of those things where, you know, nobody really understands why funding assistance isn't available for us. If we had -- you know, unfortunately, if we had money, we could do so many things. And, you know, the County has been very, very generous and has always worked well, since I've been here, to do whatever has been necessary or appropriate for our veterans. And going forward, I'm sure that you'll all be as creative and resourceful as is necessary. But this need is real, it's going to increase. And, you know, we have an outstanding reputation here in Suffolk County. We're very highly regarded with regard to our service to our veterans. Let's maintain that and let's take advantage of that, and, you know, move forward in a very positive way.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Anker has a question for you, and then I'm going to invite Ms. Mitchell up to join us.  
Legislator Anker.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Okay. And this could be a broad kind of question, but, again, if you have some quick points on it. We've been through different wars, Vietnam, World War I, World War II, and now we're going through our current situation. It's concerning to see so many returning vets not being taken care of like I think formerly we took care of the men and women who came back from serving in war. What is the real quick perspective on that? Maybe -- I don't know if both of you are familiar with the past care that we gave to our service men and women. But with that, again, my thought is we need to do more, obviously. But how does that compare with what we did prior? And then, is there anything we can do that we did previously that we can implement now or strive to do?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

A lot of what can be done and a lot of what should be done I think we are already doing. You know, in past wars, we've alternately done a very good job and probably not such a good job of serving our service members when they returned. World War II, Korea, we were on target. We provided very generous G.I. bills. We provided opportunities for veterans to return home, to go to school, to find careers, to buy homes and to become successful. We dropped the ball after Vietnam. We did not do the job that we should have done for our Vietnam veterans. But if there is any silver lining to that is that I think we have largely learned from those lessons and we're more attuned now to not making those same mistakes, and to ensure that we stand up and meet our obligation to our

returning service members.

This is -- these wars are different. We live in a different world right now, and the challenges, the demands, the needs of our veterans are changing, they're evolving. The economy, obviously, is a big factor in this whole thing. And, you know, again, we just need to keep looking. You know, we have to keep our eye on the ball. We have to make sure that we not only are seeing what has come to us, what is happening now, but that we responsibly project forward what will be coming to us so that we can properly prepare for it, and, A, both serve the veterans, and B, ensure that we do it in a responsible fashion as a government.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Okay. Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Director, anything else? Commander?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Thank you very much.

**MR. MAURO:**

That's all right. Thank you very much.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thanks so much for being with us. It is my pleasure to welcome Linda Mitchell, who is the Director of Member Services, the Huntington Township Chamber of Commerce, and has really been responsible for so many great things that the Chamber has been doing, particularly when it comes to assisting our local veterans and their families. It's really been a great example of a partnership between our local level of government and our local business organization to try and work together to see what great ideas we can come up with, and provide real meaningful assistance for our veterans and their families. So, Linda, thanks so much for being with us today.

**MS. MITCHELL:**

Thank you. I'd like to thank Legislator Stern for inviting me today, to let you know some of the positive things that we're doing through the Huntington Township Chamber of Commerce.

We had started our Veterans Committee over two years because we wanted to provide assistance and resources and awareness for our veterans and their families, and be sure that our chamber members knew about some of these resources. So our first mission was to provide a resource guide for them, not to reinvent the wheel from all the things that are out there, but we did do a resource guide for all our local people. We put this in our libraries and at the Town Hall. And this was compiled for them; we started with that.

What we've also done at some of our meetings, we've invited guest speakers, as I said, to create awareness. We've had people come and speak to us from the New York Heroes Programs about the consolidation of all the military going into the Farmingdale facility. A year ago we had a gentleman, a Sergeant, come and speak to us about it, telling us all the reasons that it may not be such a good thing for Long Island to separate all our military armories. We had him come back two weeks ago and he did tell us how it's working, how it's working out for our veterans and how it's working out for the families and the family awareness.

We've also invited some of our local people, our chamber members to come in. An attorney had come in to speak about the veterans aid and assistant pensions and programs. We've had people from the Northport VA in, and all of our local agencies are joining us.

What we did do a couple of weeks ago is host a seminar. It was our Veterans Committee hosting

an informative seminar on know and understand all your resources. Whether they were veterans or members of the families of veterans, there are resources out there and we wanted to make them aware. We discussed housing and hunger, we discussed legal issues and employment networking, but on our focus was really on hiring veterans. We are a chamber of over 500 members and we do feel it is important for our chamber members to know about these veterans. They are very marketable, they're very disciplined. These are the people that we would like to see have the jobs in our chamber businesses. So we did speak with them, and I'm very happy to say from this seminar that we did have, we did have some of our local businesses who are now working with the Northport VA Hospital to hire the veterans at this time.

For this coming holiday season, through our committee, on our chamber website, in our chamber newsletter, in our local column in the newspapers, we are looking to collect, whether it be hats, or scarves, or gloves, or socks, or maybe even jogging suits, or something that our veterans and our homeless would need, whether it be for these homeless shelters. We do work with Family Service League and the Helping Hand Rescue Mission in Huntington. We're trying to collect things for our veterans that will then be donated.

So I do want you to know that we are trying to create awareness through our chamber, who is -- as I said, it's a large chamber in Huntington Village. It's not just Huntington Chamber of Commerce, our local community. We have our chamber members from Montauk to Manhattan, anybody that would like to do business in Huntington, lives in Huntington or is working in Huntington. And I'm always looking for different things that we can do through our committee. I not only work with the Veterans Committee, but I will tell, in the chamber, we have over thirteen committees. There's always a different interest for somebody in our area. But through our Veterans Committee, I'm very proud to say that we've done a lot of things. We've had lot of people come in and I'm looking for different ideas.

So, if there's anything that we can do to help to create awareness through the chamber, please, let me know and I'll be working with you. Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you. And thank you for all of your efforts and for the efforts on the part of the chamber. And when I have the conversation, I'm sure my colleagues would agree, that when we ask professionals within our communities what can we do to help our veterans and their families, inevitably, the conversation comes back to jobs. Yes, of course, there are health care services, and we've had the conversation about the need for housing services, but the need for jobs is numbers one, two and three.

And I spend a lot of time at the VA up in Northport assisting the Salvation Army's program with feeding homeless veterans periodically. And when I have the opportunity to speak with them, they will say to the person that the biggest need that they have is the need to get to the right people who can steer them in the right direction to learn about job opportunities. There are plenty of programs that provide services with assistance, and resume writing, and building skills, and learning a computer, and all of those are important and worthy programs, but what they'll say is that those programs fall short when it comes to putting them in front of the people that have the job opportunities, or at least the people who know the people who can provide job opportunities. And that's exactly what you've done with your program, and with that assistance, and with that important example of getting people who know about the job opportunities to the people who need them at the VA, specifically, I think is a very meaningful part of the program that you provide.

And so I wanted my colleagues to hear about that. But I think more importantly, something that we can all take from what you've told us is going back to our local communities in the chambers within all of our communities and let them know the great work that you're doing, but the results that you've been able to provide, particularly when it comes to putting our veterans who need work in touch with the actual people who either provide the work or know the people who provide the

work. That is really an invaluable service.

**MS. MITCHELL:**

Thank you. I didn't mean to jump out of my seat. I guess I was a little nervous. But that's what we're trying to do, is create awareness. And, as you said, there are several programs out there. We're not out here to step on anyone's toes, we're just trying -- and, yes, for the hiring, if we can get that word out through our chamber membership and have some of our -- you know, it may not be 50 chamber members that at this time can hire, but if we start with maybe three or four, as we did with our seminar that we had last month, it's a start, and we can get the ball rolling and get the word out there. All right. Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

And thanks so much for being with us today. Anybody else? Okay. We have one other item before us, it is Introductory Resolution, ***I.R. 1925 - Declaring November "Elks National Veterans Remembrance Month" in Suffolk County (Stern)***. I'll make the motion to approve.

**LEG. D'AMARO:**

Second.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Second by Legislator D'Amaro. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? I.R. 1925 is approved. ***(Vote: Approved 5-0-0-0)***.

Anybody else? Anybody else? All right. Very good. Thank you all.

***(\*The Meeting was Adjourned at 11:31 a.m. \*)***