

VETERANS & SENIORS COMMITTEE

of the

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

VERBATIM TRANSCRIPT

A regular meeting of the Veterans and Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislative Building, 725 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on April 16, 2012.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Legislator Steve Stern - Chairman
Legislator Sarah Anker - Vice Chair
Legislator DuWayne Gregory
Legislator Ricardo Montano

MEMBER NOT PRESENT:

Legislator Tom Barraga - Excused Absence

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature
Renee Ortiz - Chief Deputy Clerk - Suffolk County Legislature
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veterans Services
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director/Office of Aging
Bob Martinez - Aide to Legislator Montano
Bill Shilling - Aide to Legislator Anker
Deborah Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern
All other interested parties

VERBATIM MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Donna Catalano - Court Stenographer

(*THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 1:05 P.M.*)

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Welcome, everybody, to the Committee on Vets and Seniors. I ask you to please rise and join in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Deputy Presiding Officer.

SALUTATION

Please remain standing and join in a moment of silence as we keep the brave women and men fighting overseas in our thoughts and prayers.

MOMENT OF SILENCE

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Hello, everybody. I just wanted to give you an update on a couple of programs. The Home Energy Assistance Program closed effective Friday, so no more applications can be accepted. And in our office, for the seniors, we processed 5,887 apps came into the office. We have about 40 left to process. So that's the end of HEAP season for this year, and it won't open up again probably until November of this year.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly, do you know offhand how that compares to last year?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Well, it's hard to tell, because in our office last year, we did closer to 7000 applications, but if you are a food stamp recipient, you automatically receive HEAP. And we have been doing outreach to people to get them on the Food Stamp Program, so then we would not see their applications come to us for HEAP. So I don't know if that has something to do with the numbers declining in terms of who we have helped this year in terms of the HEAP benefit. Or it could be because of the warm winter. I don't really know. And I'm not sure overall, because the program does belong to DSS, what their numbers look like overall. I can only speak for the applications we've done in our office.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Do you think that that number will be readily available from DSS?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I don't know.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Is that, in your experience, the kind of number that, if asked, they could come up with.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Probably. I'm sure they know what's come in. That might be something to ask. I mean, I can try to find out too if you want me to see if I can get that number.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

If you could. Maybe we'll make a request of the Commission as well.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

We're down a lot, but I think it's probably because as people get onto the Food Stamp Program, there's applications to automatically -- they don't have to fill out a HEAP app and send it to us. They're done automatically through DSS.

The other program I wanted to just speak about, I know a lot of you are aware that the State budget had taken EPIC this year and made it only to cover the doughnut hole. In the 2012-'13 State budget, they have restored most of the funding for EPIC under the State. And starting in January of 2013, they will be covering more than just the doughnut hole again. They will be -- individuals would have to be in Part D, they would have to pay whatever deductible they have under Part D, but then EPIC would start covering the drugs that are in the Part D formulary for that person, and it would be a maximum \$20 copayment, which is huge, because what happened for 2012, when they took the EPIC funding away on the State level, people who had been paying a \$20 copayment -- I know Legislator Anker heard them when we were over at the Leisures -- they were paying upwards of couple of hundred dollars for the same prescription that they had been paying a \$20 copayment for. So it's tremendous that this benefit will come back into play January 21st of 2013. It Doesn't help for 2012. But it will be coming back for them, so that's a huge benefit.

I think what has to happen, the State, because they were dismantling the program so much, probably has to put it all back together again. And in 2012, there's no fee or deductible, you just have to be within their income guidelines. I believe they will be bringing back the fees and the deductible plans again. So people will have a deductible within the higher income of the EPIC Plan, or the fee, they will have to pay before they're covered. So that's good news for the seniors for 2013, it's just not very good news for 2012.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

You think then coming up on 2013 that the applications procedure might change if one was already enrolled, would they remain enrolled or would they have to start all over again or we need to see?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I'm not sure yet. I believe because they're going to be doing fees and deductibles, they'll probably have to, you know do the self-declaration again in terms of their income, which I don't know what they did for 2012, because the application did change. So I'm not sure what they're going to do.

This is all what I heard right after the budget was passed, so I just figured that I'd pass along that you could give good news to your constituents if they're -- you know, all is not lost; they should keep looking for the information to come the end -- you know, the Fall.

The other thing is one of the things -- one of the points that somebody had made was that if they are in the program, they should stay in the program even if they're not using it this year just so that they're being made aware of what's going on with it. So if you have people who are saying, "I don't want to stay in the program," it doesn't cost them anything this year to be in the program, so stay signed up for it even if they're not using it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And then perhaps, as you said, coming up in the Fall, we should know more about what, if any, additional --

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Yeah. And we'll do our best to get the information out to everyone as we can. Is there anything else I can answer for anybody?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you, Holly.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Thanks.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Before we get to the Director, let's just make sure that we note for the record that Legislator Barraga has an excused absence.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good afternoon, Chairman, Members. Thank you again for your invitation to appear before you. We have a number of things going on. Many of them you are already aware of on some level, but I'll just quickly go through the list.

I think probably most significantly right now is we have our Annual Armed Forces Day Ceremony coming up. That is scheduled for May 9th of this year. Normally, we begin that ceremony at 11:00 a.m., unfortunately this year, there were a couple of conflicts; the most significant being Long Island National Cemetery, the military cemetery that everyone refers to as Pinelawn, is going to be conducting a service on the same day, May 19th (sic). As it turned out initially, it was the same time, same day, same everything.

The program at Long Island National is actually very, very significant to us. You may remember, last January, in January of 2011, we had a ceremony at Calverton where we interred the remains of 20 indigent veterans, veterans who are either homeless, indigent or had no next of kin to claim their remains. At that time, that was the single largest interment of veterans for that type of ceremony anywhere in this country ever. That was 20 veterans.

Long Island National at this point in time, as of yesterday afternoon, was up to 35. So obviously, this is very significant to the veteran community, and it should be to all of us. We were able to reach an accommodation with Long Island National. They are going to shift their ceremony to 9:00 a.m. that morning, we will allow, you know everybody; certainly government officials, representatives of the veterans service organizations and the veteran community and the public at large will not have to make a difficult choice now and decide which one of the two to attend.

Long Island National will have their ceremony at 9:00 a.m. We will have our ceremony at noon. So we're hopeful that that will accommodate everybody's schedules and allow everybody to attend both. On behalf of Long Island National, I extend to all of you and to all of the Legislature an invitation to join us at Long Island National on that morning for the service. It should be a pretty impressive service.

The other big thing that's coming in is the traveling Vietnam Wall is coming back to Suffolk County yet again. It may seem that this is becoming almost routine, because it's been here a number of times over the last several years. Most parts of the country, if they ever get to see it, they see it once, maybe twice, never at the -- the frequency with which we've had it is unprecedented.

It's coming back to us this year, largely in part because of the fact that it appears they're going to be retiring the traveling Vietnam Wall. It's aging. It unfortunately is made of fiberglass, so over the years, with all of the handling, the assembling, the dismantling, the transporting it, it's sustained some damage. They're probably going to be retiring it this summer. We're having an event on June 10th, I believe, at Calverton, after which, the plan -- and there's no finality to it -- but the plan is that they will be able to retire the monument in place at the Northport VA, where it had been on display last October.

They have some issues to work out at Northport. But ideally, that is the hope, is that the traveling Vietnam Wall will be able to be retired in place here in Suffolk County. And it will be here for us for as long as it survives.

I want to congratulate Legislator Stern specifically. April being the Month of the Military Child,

Legislator Stern worked with merchants in his district and had -- at Monster Mini Golf and had a really nice event yesterday. Unfortunately, I was not able to attend, but my understanding is they had somewhere around 30, maybe 30 plus families of service members and veterans in attendance. It's great, it's important that they be remembered. They often are not.

We are planning our Annual Homeless Veteran Stand Down. The stand down this year, it will be a little bit different, but largely, I think the changes will be more apparent to the folks on my side of it than to any of you. The VA at Northport has become a tremendous partner with us in the organizing of this and the preparation of the event. So that will be taking place in two weeks, not this Friday, but one week from this coming Friday. There should be a poster in each of your mailboxes with the information. If you would like more posters, please let me know. I will be happy to get them either delivered to you or distributed into your districts if you have specific locations where you would like them to be displayed.

Again, this is a very important program. We take great pride in it. We've helped probably over a thousand veterans over the course of the last six years doing this program, and we look forward to continuing. Unfortunately, the nature of the economy and the job market right now, we have, you know, a terribly large need for these types of services. So we expect it to be, unfortunately, very successful. If that makes any sense.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

Hi. Thank you, Tom. When you send out the fliers or the posters, do you send them out to all the VFWs? I have a few in my district that are pretty large. Have you sent them out to Rocky Point VFW?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

We do. We send them out to all the VFWs, all of the veterans service organizations. We also have the members of our County Executive's Veterans Advisory Board who, each of those organizations has representation on that board. They are also furnished with copies of these. We will be following up this week as we get closer to make sure that everybody, A) has them; and B) has enough of them.

Next Saturday, April 21st, there will also be a fundraiser to remember another service member who lost his battle with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and took his own life, Robert Cafici of the Marine Corps. And that will be at the 56th Fighter Group on Route 110 in Farmingdale next Saturday, the 21st of April from 5:00 to 9:00 if anybody would like to stop in and show their support to the family and pay their respects to the soldier. That is also important.

This one may seem a little bit out of left field, but sort of in keeping in theme with the Homeless Stand Down and some of the programs coming up. During the wildfires, we actually had sort of an unusual opportunity to play a role if it became necessary. As you are all aware, we have a fairly active homeless veteran outreach initiative that we run through the office. And as a part of that, we have veterans, we have folks that are living in the woods throughout the County all over the Island. And we know of populations where we have individuals or small camps, in such cases not such small camps.

When the fires began, we starting networking with our providers, the folks who provide services to the homeless in the various areas as well as VA. Fortunately, we were not able to identify anybody who was unidentified or -- unaccounted for, I should say. As far as we know, everybody was safe. But it gave us an opportunity, we had an interesting discussion with VA. And VA has agreed that in

times or circumstances such as the fires or any other type of emergency, that they will make available to us their Mobile Command Unit, which essentially is exam rooms, interviewing rooms, they have some communication capabilities.

But for the purposes of what the VA and we would do in those situations, it was more intended to serve obviously any of the population that might have been living in those woods or in those areas. We also expanded on that a little bit, and I spoke with Commissioner Williams of FRES. The vehicle -- the unit also has the ability with the examination rooms to mobilize mental health professionals. We can put psychiatrists and psychologists on the road and bring them to a scene.

And as the discussion evolved, it became apparent that the services may be beneficial not only to the veterans who may be affected, but also to those in the Firematical Police Services who -- you know, whether they're veterans or not, trauma is trauma. But some of our older -- I hate to say that, I'm almost in that population -- police officers firematic personnel, the chiefs and so forth, a lot of them are Vietnam Veterans. And, you know, there's something about taking a guy and putting him into a jungle surrounded by fire that brings things back.

So we thought that it may be a valuable asset to have available to us, to have veteran and PTSD-specific mental health professionals available for these types of emergencies. So that's been discussed, that's sort of ongoing. And if we're fortunate, we will never have to implement it, but if we should need it, we have it now available to us.

I think that's it. The only other thing that I'll mention is that Legislator Cilmi and Legislator Stern's legislation regarding the enforcement or the registration of solicitors raising money on behalf of veterans, we actually had an enforcement action last week. We had some folks operating with an expired permit who we've encountered multiple times. They seemed fine with the idea of being out there with their permits, so we accommodated their wish and let them operate that way for 15 minutes or so until we got the Police out there. We did our first enforcement where we will actually be going through the process. I had spoken with Counsel's Office earlier this week to just clarify what the process is to assess the fine. And we have now spoken with the County Attorney's Office, and that will work through its process. So the system seems to work.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And, Tom, having reviewed the legislation that's before us today, everybody is good, you're good, you're office is good, the Veterans Advisory Committee is good as well?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Thank you. Legislator Montano.

LEG. MONTANO:

Thank you. Off topic a little bit, Tom. Could you just tell me -- I haven't looked it up -- what is the budget for the Veterans Service Agency this year? What is your appropriation, if you know?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, it's in flux at the moment.

LEG. MONTANO:

What do you mean in flux? Let me rephrase the question. What did the Legislature approve in the budget for 2012?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

About 600,000.

LEG. MONTANO:

How many employees do you have under your control in your agency?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Eleven, we lost 3, and --

LEG. MONTANO:

When did you lose three, in the February cuts?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yeah -- well, one to retirement, one to a transfer; that was the -- she retreated to another position, but we lost her from our office, she was on that list.

LEG. MONTANO:

Let me ask this again -- let me rephrase it. How many people from your agency were scheduled for layoff in February layoff round? Do you understand -- you get where I'm coming from?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Two.

LEG. MONTANO:

All right. So you lost two positions from last year?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes. Potentially one additional in June.

LEG. MONTANO:

Excuse me?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Potentially one more position in June.

LEG. MONTANO:

That was my next question. In June, you're scheduled to lose one more position?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes.

LEG. MONTANO:

So that would bring you down to what as an agency, 10?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Seven.

LEG. MONTANO:

Seven. Thanks. I appreciate it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Since we are having the conversation -- thank you for bringing it up, Legislator Montano -- I just wanted to -- Tom, I know you've said it in the past, but at the same time we are facing these

challenges, you are actually seeing an increase in the amount of service members that -- veterans that you've been assisting. Maybe you can speak to the increase that you've seen this past year. And maybe for those of us who have not had that conversation with you personally, maybe you can speak briefly to what you see coming up in the next year or two.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, our numbers have been increasing steadily over the past seven years. In January of this year versus January of last year, our numbers were up a little bit over 4% from the previous year.

The two things that we anticipate or project are going to result in greater numbers of veterans and the other populations that were tasked with serving are the fact that we are in the process -- we have just completed one drawdown with our forces from Iraq; we will be entering into a drawdown early next year in Afghanistan; coupled with the issue the military is having with difficulties financially, just as everybody else.

You know, we're aware right now that the Army is reducing forces between 60 and 80,000 immediately. That's in the process of happening now. And we know that the Navy is reducing their forces by approximately 20,000 this year. Those are over and above the theatre of veterans, the war zone and combat veterans that are returning, those being discharged through attrition and just through the norm process. Those additional people who are being eliminated from the service in addition to the drawdowns are people that we had not projected would be coming back at the rate that they will now be. We don't know what numbers will be. I can't tell you with certainty how many of that population have home of record on Long Island. We won't know that until, unfortunately, they are released from service, and then we can start getting those numbers. But it's reasonable to assume that a drawdown of the 100,000 or so from Afghanistan -- from Iraq; the 80,000 from the Army, 20,000 from the Navy, that is another 100,000. So out of that population of 200,000, given the population and the ratio that we have in Suffolk County, it's reasonable to assume that we'll be seeing, you know, our fair share of those veterans. You know, they will be looking for services.

LEG. MONTANO:

Tom, you just -- you mentioned in your statement veterans and other populations that we service. I was just going to ask you, could you just expound on the other populations that you service? What did you mean by that statement?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

We are tasked with serving veterans, active-duty service members, their families, their dependents and their survivors.

LEG. MONTANO:

Okay. But it really only revolves around veterans and extended --

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes. Veterans and their extended families.

LEG. MONTANO:

Right. I just wanted to be clear on that. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, just for the record, I just wanted to make sure to publicly thank you. Thank you. You were with me, we together coordinated a program recently at the law school with some of the leaders from the various towns and their veterans service agencies along with the VA to talk about this very issue with men and women returning from active duty overseas; are we ready, are we ready to

provide them and their families the services that they need? And in an effort to be proactive knowing that there is going to be this drawdown, knowing that we are going to see -- although we might not know what the numbers are, we are going to see some type of increase in those that are going to require services here locally. Are we prepared to welcome home our servicemen and women? So I wanted to thank you. It was an important conversation. And we will be doing some good things going forward.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I thank you for hosting that. I expected that you were going to make mention of it. You know, interestingly, and this goes to Legislator Montano's question, the fact that we have now been so successful in engaging the local towns and the other areas throughout the Island, the veteran services organizations, the townships now are establishing their own, what they're referring to as veterans advisory councils or veterans advisory boards. They -- while they serve a vital role and are very important and they're becoming very good at what they do, they don't have the ability to deliver the services that we do. So really what's happening is as we expand and increase the amount of awareness into our communities, those entities as they form, result in greater number of folks being referred to us. So the better they become at their jobs, the busier we will get.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, before I let you go -- Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

Let me ask you this quick question. Someone brought to my attention that they read an article that it can take up to or over 300 days for a medical claim to be processed for a returning vet; is that true?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Absolutely.

LEG. ANKER:

Is there anything the County can do to facilitate those claims?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

This is an age-old question. You know, this simply goes back to the backlog at the VA. And as claims are received and processed in the VA, depending on the nature of the claim, you know, they go through a particular process. Three hundred days is not at all unusual.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Unfortunately, 300 days sounds like it would be an expedited process. That's how bad it is.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

There are reports of claims that are 16, 18 months and some much older than that.

LEG. ANKER:

If there is anything we can do as the Legislature, please let us know.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you. We in Suffolk County actually have a pretty solid reputation at the VA for the manner in which we prosecute or prepare our claims. When we submit something to VA on behalf of a client, it is referred to as ready-to-rate. It's not uncommon for other areas to submit claims with basic information, and that claim will be developed over time. We develop the claims before we submit them so that they are essentially, as I said, ready-to-rate. That takes a big burden off of VA, because there's not a lot of background to do; they can examine our documentation, and in most

cases, make an assessment and grant or deny based on what we submit. So we're doing what we can.

LEG. ANKER:

Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, before we let you go, because someone had asked me the question and I promised I would send it along, what is your understanding right now of services being provided to veterans in Nassau County by the Nassau County Veterans Services Agency? And what role, if any, do we currently play in a system with that?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Nassau over the last six months or so has hired, I believe, two people, so they are getting back on track. There has been -- they have been their challenges, and we have been, to the extent that we have been able, assisting or partnering with them in any possible to ensure that the veterans receive the services that they need. Nassau seems to be getting back on track. The only thing that goes along with hiring new personnel is that new staff has to be trained. They have to develop proficiency, they have to be properly trained, they have to receive the required accreditations. So that's a process that simply has to work out over time. It has improved.

LEG. MONTANO:

Just to follow up. You say they seem to be getting back on track. Do have any idea of what their budget is and how many staff people they have over there?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I do not have any idea what their budget is. I think they have seven people as well, which is an increase over what they had been operating with.

LEG. MONTANO:

Okay. Just so I'm clear, you're down to ten people or you're down to seven?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Right now, I'm down to eight.

LEG. MONTANO:

You're down to eight, and you may be down to seven.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And I have potentially one more in June.

LEG. MONTANO:

Okay. And Nassau is --

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I believe they're at seven.

LEG. MONTANO:

They're at seven. Okay. Thanks.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Before we go to the Legislative item on the agenda, I just wanted to share an idea that was conveyed to me yesterday at the event that we had for children of our service members. A Lieutenant shared with me he was at a meeting of somewhat regional significance not too long ago with other leaders from other counties, other areas throughout New York State. And when he was given the opportunity to talk about all of the important things happening here in Suffolk County relating to our veterans and their families, other leaders from other parts of the State were really just blown away, not just by what we're able to do for our veterans formally at the government level, but all the not-for-profits, all the volunteers, really our entire Suffolk County community that time and time again comes together in such a substantial way for our veterans and their families.

He wanted me to convey to all of my colleagues today the impression that he had that all of his colleagues had during the course of this conversation is that Suffolk County does it well, and it really performs each and every time when we're all called to duty to do what has to be done for our veterans and their families throughout our entire County. So he wanted me to convey that to you, Director, and to all of my colleagues here that we can all be very proud of the role that we all try to continue to play as a way to say thank you to our veterans and their families. So I wanted to convey that to you, Director.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That's wonderful news. Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

We're going to Introductory Resolutions. We have before us **IR 1295, Adopting Local Law No. -2012, A Local Law to further strengthen the County's registration of non-profit veterans organizations (Cilmi & Stern)**

This went to public hearing, which was closed. It is before us now. We heard from the Director, all is good on his front. So I'll make a motion to approve, seconded by Legislator Anker. Anybody on the motion. All in favor? Opposed? Any abstentions? IR 1295 is **APPROVED (VOTE: 4-0-0-1; Not Present - Legis. Barraga).**

(*THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED AT 1:35 P.M.*)