

**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 July 31, 2012.

**MEMBERS PRESENT:**

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

**ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:**

Legislator Horsley - D.P.O. of the Legislature  
George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature  
Renee Ortiz - Chief Deputy Clerk - Suffolk County Legislature  
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veterans Services  
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 1:08 P.M.\*)

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Welcome everyone to the committee on Veterans and Seniors. I ask everybody to rise and join in the Pledge led by Legislator Montano.

**SALUTATION**

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

**MOMENT OF SILENCE**

Thank you. Welcome, everyone, and welcome Director Ronayne.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, members. Thank you, again, for the invitation. Good morning. I have just a few things I was hoping to report on this morning just to bring you all up to speed and make you aware of a few things that are going on.

I guess the first one would be more of a housekeeping issue. We had been asked, I believe, two committees ago if we would screen the Veterans Advisory Board for their position or their opinion of the flying of the MIA-OON Flag on the mast that flies the American Flag at the Armed Forces Plaza. Being that it is the summer and we do not meet over the summer, we polled them electronically, and we got six responses via e-mail. Five were no, one was yes. So in the opinion of the board, they would not support this. Obviously, this is only their opinion, but I did want to share that with you as it was requested.

The most significant thing I think I would be reporting on today is we were fortunate enough recently to be notified by Senator Zeldin that -- you may remember back in February I attended, along with a small group of others, we had traveled up to Albany to testify at a Senate hearing concerning the issues surrounding Post Traumatic Stress Disorder amongst our veterans. And we weren't entirely sure what was going to come out of that hearing, but we are very happy to be able to report that the State, the Governor and the Mental Health Committee with Senator Roy McDonald has provided some funding.

They've allocated \$1.2 million Statewide to develop some pilot programs that will look specifically at Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. The money -- as the money is being allocated, \$800,000 of this 1.2 is going to be allocated to four counties to establish pilot programs for peer-to-peer mentoring. Of the four counties, Suffolk County was the first to be selected. We've already begun meetings, we've already started having some screenings. And we've a ways to go, but we are very proud to have been selected as the first county to be able to get something in place and see if we can't not necessarily reinvent the wheel because there are similar programs out there right now. But we believe that given the nature of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and some of the challenges that these veterans are facing that to have at least one additional option and maybe a little bit -- operating in a little bit different fashion than some of the more conventional, more mainstream mental health programs approach the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. So we're fortunate and we're pleased to be able to be a part of this.

Again, at this point, it very honestly is in its infancy. So I can't give you very many specifics, because there are not very many specifics to give you. But we have begun meeting. We've established a panel that we will be working with to come up with essentially a game plan. And going forward, I'm hoping at our next committee I'll have a great deal more information to share

with you. Other than a few technical issues, there's not a great deal more to report.

The only thing that I was slightly disappointed in, when the money was allocated, again, there were four counties that were going to share \$800,000. Given that we have such a large veterans population, I had asked that those funds be distributed equitably based on the population of the veterans in the counties participating. The decision in Albany somewhere was made that the money would be divided equally. So the four counties will each share a \$200,000 part of that grant to implement the pilot program.

Going forward beyond the pilot program, we don't know if there will be additional funding the next year or the following year. I think a great deal is going to be based on the results that we will be able to publish once we get something going. Had we been able to get a greater portion of that money based on our population, I think that would have been a more practical, in my opinion, way to approach it given the population.

But, you know, one of the important things I will share with you is a lot of things that we are seeing rolling out in the past few years certainly veteran related are specific to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. That will not be the case with this program. This program will be available to any veteran of any era, any period of service. That is one of the areas that we already identified. Again, there will be many more to come. But we decided and agreed upon very early on that we're not going to be exclusionary and not permit veterans from other periods of service to participate in this. A veteran is a veteran in my opinion, and they should all have access to it.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Tom, who makes up this advisory board that determines what kind of services are going to be offered under this program?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well, the funding is coming to us through the Senate's Mental Health Committee or through the Office of Mental Health. Senator Zeldin had established a Veterans Advisory Panel a little bit over a year ago of which I am a member. The members of the panel -- the panel is comprised of that advisory body. As of right now, there are five of us. We don't anticipate that -- we call it a subcommittee -- the planning committee for the mentoring program, we don't anticipate that it will grow much beyond that five, only for purposes of being able to keep it manageable.

The members right now consist of mental health professionals, myself, a non-veteran, a gentleman who is a non-veteran, but who has a son deployed and is in the medical profession, and the third person is also a mental health professional who runs a number of veterans programs throughout Nassau and Suffolk County. So we think we have a fairly representative group on this panel in terms of the group that we're trying to represent and the group that we're trying to help.

The other target audience, if I could maybe back up from your question a little bit, the other population that we're going to try to target also is going to be the family members and the loved ones of these services members and the veterans, because as, you know, any of the members that are veterans certainly will attest, PTSD does not exist in the vacuum. It's not something that the veteran and the veteran only experiences. This is something that extends out to the family and to his larger circle. So we're going to make certain that we also allow ourselves to address the family members and the loved ones of these individuals. They will play a role not only in receiving getting their own treatment, but also in being able to be a part of the process in providing the treatment to the veteran himself or herself.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Anker.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Thank you so much for, you know, focusing on this issue, because it is so important. I have a family member who has mental illness. I'm familiar with it, I see it so much, especially with the young kids being sent off. And, you know, they come back and they've been through so much stress, and they're looking for a job and they can't find a job, and that adds more stress. And it is so debilitating. So I think this program -- hopefully this pilot program will, you know, just create an extension of a place for them to go and really get their feet back on the ground.

How many -- now, you mentioned that Suffolk County -- is it Suffolk or Long Island, has one of the largest populations of returning veterans, and what is that number?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Well, we don't have the largest number of returning veterans. We have the largest population of veterans in the New York State. The number of returning veterans, that's a tough number to nail down. I mean, we don't have a definitive number that I can offer you. It's somewhere between four and 8000 at this point. You know, VA, Northport is one of the areas that we look at for this information. But VA, unfortunately or fortunately, I guess, Northport being a pretty exceptional facility, their catchment is essentially Nassau and Suffolk County, but they do see a significant number of veterans from outside of Nassau and Suffolk. They do get veterans coming in from the five boroughs of New York, from parts of New Jersey, other areas and New York and even Connecticut. So, you know, to the best of their ability, they try to keep those numbers as clear as they are able to for us, but we don't have a really definitive number on that. It's a range.

**LEG. ANKER:**

So we don't have a number on returning vets. What about the actual veterans? Do we have any numbers on those?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

The number of veterans living in Suffolk County right now? The 2010 Census tells us right now that there's about 88,000. We've challenged that number. We believe that the number that they took away from us based on the 2000 Census was very considerable. We had gone from just under 120,000 to, again, 87, 88,000. We don't believe that that number is entirely accurate.

As I've reported here before, one of the reasons that we challenged this new figure is that there was no question asked on either the long form or the short form on the 2010 Census. They didn't poll for veterans status, veteran resident of the household, prior military service. So all of these new numbers are really just actuarial projections.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Could there be a type of mentorship with the veterans that are already here to work with those veterans that have experienced some similar experiences? You know, in other words, the program that you are designing right now, is there a mentorship part of that?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

That's exactly the population that we'll be targeting, hoping that they'll come forward. We have already had a number of individuals come forward volunteering their services. What we intend to do is develop a criteria for those who would be working in that capacity. Once that criteria has been established, then we'll be able to make a better determination on who the mentors will be, but they certainly will be veterans. At least that much, we have agreed on.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Montano.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

Good afternoon, how are you there? Just a couple of questions on a couple of issues. First one, you said that we challenged the census numbers. When you say "we challenged," what does that mean? Who is we and what kind of challenge was it?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

By challenge, we've written twice to the Bureau of the Census asking for a clarification as to how they've arrived at these numbers.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

When you say, "we," you mean your office.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

My office.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

Okay.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

My office, I'm sorry.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

But no lawsuit was filed or anything like that, right?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

No, there was not.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

Okay. So did you get a response?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

No.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

All right. Switching gears, this committee that -- you said the advisory committee has five members. All right. Can you name them? Do you know who they are? I know that you mentioned that they are in various fields, but is there a list of names that you have?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Yes. Myself, Michael Stoltz, John Javis.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

Michael Stoltz, he's from --

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Michael Stoltz is the Chairman of Clubhouse and now Suffolk County United Veterans Clubhouse. Took over and assumed Suffolk County united Veterans as of January of this year. Michael Stoltz, John Javis, who is a Director at the Long Island Health Alliance at LIJ North Shore. Hattie Baldwin, Hattie Baldwin is a non-veteran. She is a nurse who works in this area. She is also the fiance of Joseph Dwyer, the gentleman in the painting on the wall behind us. So she is one of the people we are going to be working with as a layperson and family member to ensure that we're properly addressing the needs and concerns of those families. And the fifth person is Dennis O'Donnell.

Dennis is also a military parent. He has a son who is deployed at the moment, but he is a professional in the medical field. He is not a clinician but he is career medical field.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

Thank you. Thank you. And these people were selected by, what, the Senate Advisory Committee?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

These individuals are all members of the Senators Veterans Advisory Panel. The committee itself was formed by agreement between myself and the Senator.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

Now, if I may, you talk about this grant from the -- the \$200,000. You said no specifics at this point, so I gather you don't know how this money is going to be spent; is that accurate?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

At this point, no. We don't have any definitive definition of how the money has to be broken down or spent.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

Okay. And you don't know if it's recurring money.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

At this time, we do not believe that it is.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

So you don't think this money would be used for staff purposes then, do you?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Honestly, I don't believe so. And if I had the option of not using it for staff, I would rather not use it for staff at this time.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

Sure, because then we'd have to fund it the following year, right?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

That's only one of the reasons, but, yes, that's a big factor.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

Okay, thanks. Last thing, with respect to the bill that's before us, 1364, Ronald James Sorenson. Could you just tell me who he is? Is he from Long Island? He is apparently the designer of the flag that you mentioned.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

That is my understanding. I don't know Mr. Sorenson other than having met him here. I have heard that he is both a Suffolk County resident and a New Jersey resident. My understanding is that he is a New Jersey resident, and when he visited this committee, I believe, he traveled from New Jersey to be here. But he designed this flag, I believe some time in the early to mid-1990's. Beyond that, I don't know a great deal about him other than what I read in the literature, the same literature that he had shared with the committee.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Barraga.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Hi, Tom. How are you doing. I just want to follow a little bit on Mr. Montano's question. I'm also concerned about the -- you said it's \$200,000, and you want to set up a pilot peer mentoring for PTSD victims. I guess the question I really have -- I'm concerned about what happens when the \$200,000 is exhausted and you have a program in place that's no longer in place. Are you mandated by what Zeldin passed to set up a pilot program, or do you have options? For example, there are organizations already in existence that treat PTSD. Would it be possible to give them -- split the money up among those organizations so that even when the money is exhausted, the organizations are still in place to treat PTSD victims?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

The purpose of the funding is to establish a new veterans peer-to-peer mentoring program for veterans suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. We have looked at this issue, and in the event that for some reason this funding does not recur, that it is not restored going forward, we are intending to work with established providers in the community who are already providing certain mental health services in this field, in this area, for PTSD and other veteran-related, veteran-specific issues.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

You'd be shifting these patients over to another organization?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I don't know so much that we'd be shifting them. Obviously we're hoping that the funding would recur. If it does not, we want to ensure that we don't just pull the plug on people.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Let's say you could ease them over to another organization if the funding was depleted. What would not be eased over would be the counselors, the psychiatrists, those people that these individuals have been seeing during your pilot program period. They would probably wind up with new therapists, new counselors, new psychiatrists with the other organizations. All I'm saying is that if you have the flexibility, you might want to consider giving the money to established groups that would be there for the long term even though the money is finite.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

That is one of the things that we plan on doing. We have three conference calls scheduled for this week and I believe one for next week to interview potential trainers and advisors, that would be the National Association of Social Workers, other mental health groups. Included in this process are going to be groups like the Rosen Center, Clubhouse, folks who are already established in our community who are already providing these services.

Again, as a monitoring program, as a peer-to-peer mentoring program, the plan, as it exists right now, and it certainly is still evolving, is that the groups will not necessarily be run by psychiatrists or psychologists. They would be more -- in some ways, it's going to almost resemble a 12-step program. We will have professional mental health folks available. We will have them in place. They will be available, they will be on-site. But the crux of the program is going to be veteran-to-veteran, not even so much one-on-one, but more in small groups. If we do need to, at some point, shift over to these other organizations because the funding goes away, the intent will be that we will have these people in place already. We're not going to have to go looking for them at the end of the day and ask them to become involved. We'll have them involved as a part of the ongoing process.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Okay.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Montano.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

I just want to be clear. This program, is it going to be administered through your staff? When you say, "we," you are throwing me off.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

My apologies. By "we" when I say "we" in this context, I'm referring to this committee. My office, while the funding will be administered through my office, my staff will actually not have very much to do with it. I'll probably be the primary point in my office. This is going to be more an effort of this committee that we've already discussed coming from the panel and from the Senator's office. And my office will be more of a vehicle through, which to oversee and disperse the funding. We're not going to have a large responsibility in terms of staff or administration in that regard. I don't have the resources to do that.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

That's what I was thinking. Exactly. What I'm thinking is that -- what I'm hearing is that more than likely, this money is going to pass through this committee and really go to the mental health professionals to do the peer-to-peer training or therapy or whatever you call it.

**MR. RONAYNE:**

Some of it. Again, we don't have a narrative yet telling us where specifically or precisely this money has to go. So I don't know what the breakdown of that distribution is going to be at. Obviously, that would be a part of it. But until we get -- again, there's a call today, there's a call at four o'clock today. I'm hoping that's when we'll get some of those answers.

**LEG. MONTANO:**

Okay. Just curious. Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Anker.

**LEG. ANKER:**

I can tell you the group that really helped my family when we dealt with a family member with mental illness, it's National Alliance on Mental Illness, it's NAMI. And what it is, it provides a very strong support group, and that's what seems to work better than medication, better than doctors, better than a psychiatrist or psychologist, it's pretty much what you are focusing on. And this group helps coordinates that. So, again, I highly recommend them. Thank you.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Again, what you're describing is similar. Our intent is not to try to replace the clinicians, we're not trying to replace the VA, we're not trying to replace any of these well-respected, highly-effective programs that already exist. We're hoping that this will allow for another option, because we do have veterans out there who we see routinely who, you know, A, B and C don't quite fit them. So all we're really hoping to do is provide another alternative for them so that if there's somebody out there who's falling through the cracks or who's not getting the services or a benefit from a service that they would like, that they will have another option.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Again, until that person who is not thinking clearly has some type of trust and guidance in another person, it's sort of saying, you know, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make them drink." Well, you can try to help that person, try to show them there's medication available, but they may not want to take it or accept it. So, again, I give you a lot of thanks for what you are doing. And I think this is a wonderful direction.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Thank you. And to that point, that's why we're trying to ensure that we include the family members, because the veterans themselves don't always recognize the need or the extent of the need, and the family members play a crucial role.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Gregory.

**LEG. GREGORY:**

Hey, Tom. I just read today or yesterday or within the past day or two, the Town of Babylon is starting their own pilot program to address PTSD. Have we had any involvement with that?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Apparently I found out about it the same time you did. I was going to call Councilman Donnelly this afternoon to see if we could, you know, speak and have a conversation about what they are doing. And, you know, maybe we can help them, maybe they can help us. To me, this is not about turf. This is an issue that should transcend that, really just be about what can we collectively do, certainly as government, to provide the help to these veterans that they need. So I intended on reaching out this afternoon. I only learned about this this morning.

**LEG. GREGORY:**

Okay. Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

It would seem that based on the limited information that I have about what they are going to be doing in the Town of Babylon that there could be a real opportunity there, a real synergy to help a locality really develop something that isn't being done at this point. It might be a great opportunity to bring your advisory team to -- on site in Babylon to work with Councilman Donnelly and his colleagues there. It seems like they are a program that is looking to do things that are perhaps out of the ordinary. And there could, again, be some great synergy there.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Absolutely. And if there's a way that we can work together -- the Councilman happens to be a pretty good man. As a New York City Firefighter, you know, he certainly appreciates the importance of this issue. And he's been involved in many other veterans issues over the years even before he had gotten into Town Government. So I look forward to my conversation with him on this.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Director, a critically important program. We wish you every success of course. And anything that we can do to be of assistance along the way, please, you know, you got us. Please always feel free to let us know.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Thank you. Again, I wanted to only inform you or make you aware of this, because, as clearly, there are many questions to be answered, but I didn't want you to find out about this in Newsday

and then, you know, wonder why I hadn't shared it. So as soon as I have more information, I promise to share it with you. I wanted to at least let you know of the existence of this new issue.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good. Anybody else for Director Ronayne? Okay. Very good.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Thank you very much.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you. Director, before we let you go, you had mentioned that in a poll of the members of the advisory board that it was a five to one. The question came up, how many total members make up the advisory board?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Right now there are 16. A full complement would be 20. Unfortunately, it's been a rough year. We've had -- one person has submitted a resignation due to health issues, we had one pass away, and two -- one retired and one simply moved on. So we do have some vacancies to be filled.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

And, of course, the preference would have been for the advisory board to convene for this to be taken up in a formal way with at least a quorum, with most, if not everybody, present, but this is a time sensitive issue, because there's a date attached to it. That's why you made the outreach effort, because this was a decision that needed to be put before members of the advisory board now so that their recommendation could come back to us in a timely way.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

That's correct. I believe that the issue in terms of being time sensitive, I believe that the question was -- the request was that if approved, the flag would first fly on September 11th.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

When we do reconvene the board, we will put this formally before them for the purposes of a having a formal vote. But I think that this vote was representative of what the discussions had been after our last meeting with Mr. Sorenson.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you. With that then, we do have before us **IR 1364, Authorizing the MIA-OON Flag to be flown at the Armed Services Plaza at the H. Lee Dennison Building, Hauppauge during the month of September (Romaine).**

Give the representation made by the Director, this was placed before member of our County Veterans Advisory Committee. We heard the report from the Director. With that and based on that representation, and, again, given the time sensitive nature of it, I will make a motion to table subject to call.

**LEG. GREGORY:**

Second.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Seconded by Legislator Gregory. Anybody on the motion? All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions?

IR 1364 is **TABLED SUBJECT TO CALL**  
**(VOTE: 5-0-0-0).**

Anybody else? No? Very good. Thank you.

**(\*THE MEETING WAS ADJOURNED AT 1:36 P.M. \*)**

**{ } DENOTES BEING SPELLED PHONETICALLY**