

VETERANS AND SENIORS COMMITTEE
OF THE
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE
MINUTES

A meeting of the Veterans and 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 February 25, 2013.

Members Present:

Legislator Stern - Chairman
Legislator Anker - Vice-Chair
Legislator Barraga
Legislator Gregory

Also In Attendance:

George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature
Legislator Kara Hahn - 5th Legislative District
Debbie Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern
Michael Pitcher - Aide to Presiding Officer Lindsay
Paul Perillie - Aide to Legislator Gregory
Kevin LaValle - Aide to Legislator Muratore
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director, Office for the Aging
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veteran's Services
Michael J. Opatovsky - Suffolk County United Veterans
Jeffrey Bailey - Suffolk County United Veterans
Rick Brand - Newsday
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken and Transcribed By:

Gabrielle Skolom - Court Stenographer

VS 2/25/13

(Meeting called to order at 1:03 p.m.)

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Committee on Veterans and Seniors. I'd ask everybody to please rise and join us in the pledge led by Legislator Muratore.

(*Pledge of Allegiance*)

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

(*Moment of silence observed*)

Thank you. Okay. Welcome, everyone. We do have some guests with us today that we look forward to hearing from. Let's -- Holly, let's have you come up first.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Hello. Just so you know, I know the Home Energy Assistance Program is always a program that everybody's interested in. That program, we've heard rumors it might be closing middle of March, end of March, so I would encourage your residents to apply if they haven't applied already. The other thing I just wanted to let you know is that the applications are running about a thousand less than we've had in the past. Again, I think I explained at another meeting that it's because the outreach for food stamps has been pretty successful, and if you're in food stamps, you automatically get the HEAP benefit. So our office has -- we've processed so far 4,658 applications to date, and last year, we probably did, all told, about 5800 for the program, and the year before that, we did almost 6500 applications. So we're definitely down a lot from two years ago, and I believe it's because the outreach for food stamps has been pretty successful, and we continue to do that. It's a better way for someone to get the benefits. It automatically enrolls them into the HEAP Program if they have the food stamps.

The other thing is the luncheon is Wednesday, May 8, and that will be at Villa Lombardi's, so if you can put that on your calendar. The picnic is scheduled for Tuesday, July 17 with a rain date of -- I'm sorry, Tuesday, July 16 with a rain of July 17. And the Senior of the Year application is due back in my office March 14. We sent that information out to all the offices, so if you have anyone that you're interested in nominating for the Senior of the Year, we would appreciate if you would get those in because we will be voting in the Advisory Board meeting on March 18, so there's not a lot of leeway. If you miss the date, you miss the date because they do pick them pretty quick, so I would appreciate if you get those in. If you have questions on any of those things, you could just let me know, and I'll try to answer them for you. Does anybody have questions for me on the office or what's going on?

State budget is pretty -- the proposed State budget, it was good to us in the sense that there were no cuts per se, so that's a bonus when you say that there's no cuts. Funding these days seems to be good funding.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Exactly. All right. We're good.

LEG. ANKER:

Can I ask?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

Hey, Holly.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Hi.

LEG. ANKER:

Thanks for coming, and I have a question. My question is during the snow, the blizzard -- and I have quite a few senior facilities over there and, of course, they had problems with the snow -- I was getting calls from Leisure Village about, you know, them being snowed in, but would it be the private community -- so how would you -- again, I got a hold of their security and they went and they checked on some of ladies that felt uncomfortable. But, again, we did have some major issues in our senior communities.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

My understanding with the senior communities is that they are responsible for that snow removal, so it's not something that the individuals within those communities have to do, so their arguments would be with the company that runs those communities.

LEG. ANKER:

I think it was just, basically, that some of the elderly ladies felt very uncomfortable not being able to open their doors. I mean, that's how high the snow was. We had so much snow in my area, and it still hasn't melted there.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

That's a problem for seniors in general, and it's a problem that I think our office is going to start working with. The clients that we have on a regular basis, we're going to try to come up with some kind of -- we were just talking about it recently -- some kind of questions when the caseworker goes out to speak with somebody. You know, what is your plan? Because the plan can't be that you call our office or you call a church because the resources just aren't out there on a public level to shovel somebody's sidewalk. So they really need to make a plan prior to an event, and that doesn't always happen. So I think we're going start trying to encourage that a little more that they have to take some responsibility for what their preplan is because, you know, the days of Boy Scout troops and churches and other organizations being able to fill that need, it's just not there. I saw that when I worked on a town level running senior programs. You know, the phone calls after a snow storm are always about, "Well, who's going to shovel me out?" Well, it's just not -- it's not there. You know, the services are not available for that, and they really do have to take some responsibility about making the plan. It's like having somebody mow your lawn. You have to develop that plan prior to the event.

LEG. ANKER:

Maybe there's something we can help coordinate with FRES, you know, with your office and FRES, and see if we can get some of these senior communities to have some type of insightful meeting and to understand what is their emergency plan, because, again, I think it would put a lot of people more at ease. But I remember even Irene, I remember Leisure Village was talking about, you know, some of the people that live there, they didn't know really what the plan was.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

But they would have to go back to whatever their lease says or whatever the community -- the management plan. There's so many of these communities out there, and they have all their own little twitchy obligations and responsibilities, and what they paid for and what the person's responsible for. Whatever their common cost is should be paying for some of those services, but they really have to look at that. So I'm not quite sure that you could do a one-plan-fits-every-community.

LEG. ANKER:

I'm thinking maybe having a meeting to brainstorm. Birchwood has this plan; this works well. We have this plan over here at Leisure Knoll. Strathmore had some issues also with snowplowing. I'm sure there's not one size fits all, but, again, just to reassure people because we're getting bombarded. And so far my area has gotten hit the hardest, I think, the two hurricanes and the blizzard, and a lot of it has -- we have a high number of seniors in the community.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

You have a lot of senior communities.

LEG. ANKER:

So we'll talk more about that.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Okay. Thanks.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly, thank you.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Yep.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director Ronayne.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good afternoon. I have only a few things that, specifically, that I wanted to report on just to keep you informed and keep you up-to-date. Before I go into that, though, I do want to make you aware. I received a text message on Friday night from one of my military contacts in the area. I received a confirmation on Saturday and had a follow-up discussion earlier this morning that we have had another local suicide. Took his life over the weekend. Veteran of the fighting 69th, multiple deployments, TBI, PTSD; and, tragically, as if this wasn't awful enough, I ran him through our system, through our database this morning, and he is in our system, so he is technically a client of ours. He has been referred to us through the medical center at Northport. Unfortunately, when we did his telephone intake, he never followed up and came in in person. We got as far as the partial telephone intake, and we didn't get to actually meet this Veteran. But just so that you are aware that this problem continues. This issue is ongoing, and we continue to search both literally and figuratively to see if we can come up with some rhyme or reason or rationale for this. As I told you at our last committee, we will be convening another meeting of the County Executive's Veteran and Military Suicide Prevention Task Force. As soon as we have a date for our next meeting, I will inform the chairman of what that date will be, but I felt that you needed to know about this.

Now, let me contrast that with perhaps a little bit of good news. I read an article over the weekend -- and I have made copies; I've got copies for all of the members -- that suggests, and while the numbers are not substantial, this report does suggest that there is a change occurring in the employment rate amongst veterans, that the numbers are decreasing in some cases, specifically or primarily with our veterans between the ages of 18 and 24 that we have spoken of numerous times. I know Legislator Gregory, in particular, had some personal thoughts on this because of the significant numbers. That age group, that demographic, up until late 2011 was roughly 30 percent unemployment. There is some -- at least one report now that is suggesting that that unemployment rate amongst that demographic is now 22.7. So if this report bears out, if it's supported by any other study, that would be excellent news to see a seven-point reduction in the unemployment amongst that population.

As always, and certainly when we talk about employment and unemployment, my concern with this number would be, because the number of years that we have had Veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan now, how many of that seven percent are actually finding employment versus simply having left the workforce or stopped seeking work. So I don't know what the breakdown is in that regard, but if there's any validity to these numbers, there is some suggestion that there's a changing trend in the unemployment rate of a number of veteran populations. I've got a copy of the report here, the article that cites the report. I'll leave copies for all of the members, and you can see some of the other details that are cited.

As the winter has progressed, we all know we've been having a pretty rough winter. We just talked about the snows. We, as with every other office, have a demographic -- we have a population that we pay particular attention to, and we had a number of specific instances where we had veterans of limited ability, primarily our disabled population with issues during the snow. We were able to respond to several of them. Quite honestly, some we were able to direct towards some level of assistance, and some we were not. But we are aware that as time goes on, I think as Holly was saying with her office, that we need to do a better job of encouraging these communities to have a plan in place, to not simply rely on us waiting to post event, when we have a weather event, and contacting us for assistance. We would love to be able to do it. It's just not a practical reality. We can't do it.

Along those same lines, as the winter has progressed, we have been continuing our outreach. It has been somewhat limited. We are looking to start increasing the amount of outreach, so as the winter wanes down and the spring begins to come upon us, we'll be increasing the number of outreach efforts. I don't have numbers yet, but I can tell you that about three weeks ago, the annual homeless count was done. I don't know what the numbers were. I have seen some preliminary numbers, but I know that there were significant contacts made, so as soon as that report is issued from the homeless coalition, I'll provide the chairman with a copy of that as well. And that was -- this year, specifically, there were efforts made to specifically identify veterans within that homeless count, so hopefully that will be available to us. You'll hear more about this, I'm sure, from our good friends at Suffolk County United Veterans in just a moment.

But the Peer-to-Peer Program is moving along. We are, I think quite happy with the results thus far. We are having a very good response from the community. We are having increasing numbers of veterans responding, come forward to attend our groups. I was informed just a while ago in the lobby that we have now established a new group that, much to the credit of our coordinator and to one of our facilitators who sort of spontaneously developed a group that we had not projected putting in place just by being out there, effectively outreaching in the community to make people aware of the program, that they spontaneously enlisted, I think, nine more veterans to form yet another new group, so it is clearly being well-received. I think the fact that it is being well-received demonstrates that this need does exist, and we are hopeful that it will continue to be well-received.

That being said, as I have told you recently, we are funded for at this point only one year. It is a pilot program. We do have a day scheduled in Albany on March 13 that we will be doing some advocacy, meeting with some of our officials at the State level. I know I had spoken with a couple of the members of the committee regarding the possibility of support from the committee and from the Legislature. Again, funding is going to be the light part of this program. Ideally, we'll move forward and be -- get to a point where we'll be able to enlist the support of, perhaps, corporate sponsors or veteran service organizations; I'm not entirely sure yet where, but we are at this point in time beginning to look at nongovernmental sources for the revenue to continue the program.

I think, simply stated, the evidence is in front of us. The response that we have had, the number of veterans that we have had come forward and enlist and take part in this program clearly demonstrates that this need is very much present in Suffolk County, and the importance of keeping this program continued could not possibly be understated in my opinion.

Again, I reported to you a moment ago that we've had another suicide in the last couple of days. I don't know if we would have been able to help this individual or not. I would like to believe that by having these programs and these opportunities available for these veterans who are in crisis to access, that we might be able to help some, maybe not all, but certainly some. If we're not here doing this, we certainly can't help anybody. So the importance of keeping this program online is absolutely critical, and I would hope that we could count on, and I'm quite sure that we can count on, your support to see what our efforts are going forward, that you'll be supportive of those efforts.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, I asked you before but any idea when the State is going to be doing their analysis to quantify the effectiveness of not just our pilot program but the other pilot programs throughout the State?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The week before last, we were contacted by the individuals from the School of Social Welfare at SUNY Albany. They are going to be conducting the actual evaluative research program on the project. Quite honestly -- and we had expressed this to them in a conference call -- I think they're a little bit late to the game. We're in budget season now in New York State, and for us to be going to Albany in early to mid-March, advocating for funding for a program that they're only just now in early March -- late February, early March beginning to take a look at, I wish they had come out sooner. That study is in the process of being initiated. They are now in contact with all four counties. We have asked that prior to an actual report being issued that they provide us with some sort of a document simply stating that they have spoken with us, they have interviewed us, they have examined our program outline, they discussed with us our numbers, our census, our demographics; and we're hopeful that that would be supportive, but I would have liked to have seen the evaluators get on board sooner than they did. That, unfortunately, was outside the control of any of the counties.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Please, along the way, let us know how and when we can be of assistance.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. Thanks.

I guess, Michael, come on up.

MR. STOLZ:

Good afternoon.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Welcome.

MR. STOLZ:

Thank you for the opportunity to come before you again. I'm Mike Stolz, the executive director of Suffolk County United Veterans. I wear a couple of other hats. As I told you before, I'm also the executive director of the Clubhouse of Suffolk and, shortly, the Mental Health Association in Suffolk through a series of mergers and such. I was before you a couple months ago, as Mr. Ronayne discussed with you the rollout of the Joseph P. Dwyer Veteran PTSD Peer-to-Peer Project. We are fortunate, Suffolk County United Veterans, to be the manager of that contract under the direction and oversight of the County Veterans Service Agency, which, by the way, is just an absolute honor to work with Mr. Ronayne, who is -- through this project, I've gotten to see how a number of other counties work in terms of handling veteran affairs and, if you didn't know it already, this County has an incredible gift and asset with the leadership that Mr. Ronayne provides us on behalf of overseeing

our veterans in this County. I know that didn't need to be said, but I wanted to say it, anyways.

So today I'll be talking -- I brought all the troops here to tell you a little bit more about the rest of our agency, Suffolk County United Veterans. I've been brought on as executive director through the work of this gentleman on my left who will talk to you in just a second. This is John Lynch, the founder of Suffolk County United Veterans, and he'll give a little bit of a history, but as John is deciding to move toward retirement after many years of tremendous service to this organization and to this county, he asked -- he noticed that a good number of our veterans -- and we serve homeless veterans -- a large percentage of them came to us to our shelter with the behavioral health problems, and it was John's idea to affiliate with an organization that had expertise in working with people who have had serious mental health problems, and that's Clubhouse of Suffolk, so that's kind of how our agencies came together.

The mission of the organization is to help homeless veterans regain dignity in their life and find productive roles and, along the way, to be helped in a model that is very much about peer-to-peer veterans helping veterans. So without any further ado, I'll let John talk and then Wilkins and Joanne, who are our program directors, will talk about their programs briefly and introduce to you a couple of guys, one guy who is currently in our shelter and another who is moved on from homelessness to now has permanent housing.

So, John Lynch.

MR. LYNCH:

Good afternoon. My name is John Lynch, and as Mike said, you know what I've been doing. Thanks, Mike, and thank you, Tom, and it's very -- it's like déjà vu for me to come here today. It's been so many years since I've been here.

When we first opened Suffolk County United Veterans, we had our meetings in the back room here in this building, so that was 22 years ago. How we got started was I was doing a reunion back in 1980 of homeless veterans, and I found one who was in Vietnam with me who was eating out of a garbage can, so that's how it got started. I ended up trying to get him detoxed and went to the VA here, and they weren't able to handle that because he was on something called -- what was the name of that? I forgot the name of that, but it was a medication that was being used at that time to transfer people from cocaine to society. It didn't work well for him, and we couldn't detox him. So as a result of that, I ended up going to many other parts of the country -- of the County and eventually got him into a hospital in the City, and from there, he came to work for me. I had an equipment business at that time, and he worked with me and he went on to -- back to school; it was a real success. And, anyhow, that's how we got started with the homeless.

The director of Northport at that time asked him, as he was going back there for treatment, if he knew somebody who might be able to open a house for homeless veterans. There was about 40 veterans in Northport and the police department was in the business. The County police were responsible to take him to different parts and to get him out of the VA. So as a result of that, this gentleman, who is now a medical doctor, turned around and -- at the time, a fellow named -- the executive director's name was Smith, has since then passed away so... a lot of change.

Anyway, as a result of that, I opened a place on 112 in Patchogue, a homeless halfway house, and me not being trained in mental health or any of those areas -- I just had a business background -- I couldn't figure out what halfway was: halfway up or halfway down. So as a result of that, we were renting that place and a lot of bumps in the road, and finally I was looking in the paper one day for a place that was different because we were renting, and I thought, "This is not a good idea," so we found this place in Yaphank called the Veterans Place today. And the result is that the Veterans now has -- I think we have 10 or 11 locations, which they own. So the Veterans Place is run by the veterans themselves, not by me, not by any executive directors. It's them, and the program is now developed to be from homelessness to home ownership, so the veterans do their own cooking,

cleaning, and they are responsible for each step.

We're moving forward, and thanks to Clubhouse of Suffolk, they have helped us over the years with mental health issues, and sometimes the VA is overloaded, and sometimes it's very hard for them to take care of some of these veterans who have PTSD in particular, as they have -- I have two veterans in particular that came through the program, and I'm very sure they wouldn't be around if it wasn't for Clubhouse of Suffolk because they weren't qualified to go to the VA. The ones that have the most PTSD sometimes can't access their services on their own. So I was lucky enough; God's been good to us, and we've had people like Wilkins, who is next door to me here, over the years, and he's a powerful example, and that's what it's about. It's leadership by example.

I have learned a lot about myself in this process. In the last 25 years since I have been doing this, I've grown and I've learned from them more than I could have learned at any college. My wife says I spent more than it would have cost me to go to Harvard, but that's okay. This education has really been good for me. I've grown, and I have to thank everybody who is at this table and everybody who is involved, all the veterans. I think we have 60 now, Will?

MR. YOUNG:

Uh-huh.

MR. LYNCH:

And they have been the powers that helped me to grow. So it's not about telling these fellas what to do. It's about showing them, and that's what Will does. And I'd like to introduce to you now, are you the next speaker, Will?

MR. YOUNG:

Joanne.

MR. LYNCH:

Joanne. And Joanne has been with me from the very beginning. She came -- it's a long story, but anyhow. I was on the Workforce Investment Board, and that's how I found Joanne many years ago. Thank you for all your help, Joanne, and thank you, everybody here; appreciate this opportunity. Buh-bye.

MS. MASSIMO:

Can you hear me? I'm one of the program directors, as John said. I have been there almost 20 years since we left the building in Yaphank, and I was just going to give you a little brief outline of some of the programs that we run. We have shelter and transitional housing, permanent housing, senior housing. We have two pantries for veterans. I brought some cards with phone numbers for the pantries and the addresses. We have a new freedom transportation program that brings low-income folks to or from jobs and school during the hours when Suffolk Transit isn't running. That's one of the hard things, is to get back on your feet is to -- can't get a job because you don't have a job, can't get a car because you don't have a job, so we try to fill in some of the gaps with transportation.

And we're looking to expand that program to help veterans get to the VA when they have nonmedical appointments because it's a big thing to get to the VA. It's a couple of buses. It takes a long time. We also participate with the greater Bellport Community Youth Farmers Market that goes from July through October, and Suffolk County United Veterans provides the transportation for -- picks up the produce and delivers it to the farmers market, Saturdays, once a week. And we employ two veterans part time a couple of hours every Saturday to get them back on their feet. That's a 17-week program. We have the Veterans Peer-to-Peer that Mike and Tom were talking about. We also have a homeownership program, which Wilkens is the first program that went through that, come through our program. And we have some 72(h) properties that we sell to a veteran as affordable housing, which we have a house right now that's being prepared to be sold,

and we have job training program.

MR. YOUNG:

Good morning. My name is Wilkens, and I'm also program director at Suffolk County United Veterans, and I'm also the proud product of the hard work that they produce over there. And I have been taught that if you want to make a chain, you have to put yourself in the position to make changes, by this man right here, and I found myself in that position today to where I am now allowed to make changes for people that went through the same thing that I went through.

At Suffolk County United Veterans at the shelter where I basically try to work out of, we basically call it "boot camp," because it's where everything starts at again. It's a community-ran program where we try to instill our pyramid of housing, education, employment, housing, career and homeownership. Housing means that we take people off the street. We take veterans that have no place to go and nowhere else to turn and provide them with housing. But not only do we provide them with housing, we provide them with support. We provide them with case management. We provide them with all the necessities that Joanne just explained in order for them to become productive, and after we do those things, we try to instill the educational part of the "how you feel." We try to boost their morale, build their self-esteem up, because once a person is homeless and they've lost everything, they don't have too much to look forward to, so we try to instill things in them, make sure they feel good, because if you feel good about yourself, you're going to want to do good things. And we try to help people feel good by instilling what we've learned in the military, basically, is our camaraderieship (sic), know what I mean? Everybody helps everybody. I always tell the guys, "This is a chain, and everybody is a link, and if one link doesn't take care of what it's supposed to, it's no longer a chain." We try to help them understand that they have to be responsible for each other and also themselves.

We have 24 beds. We have a policy of where, you know, three beds, two beds, one-man room beds, upon your success of the things that you do, we have a social worker there that sits down with them and meets with them twice a month, make sure they're doing the things that they need to do. We advocate for them as far as financial benefits, medical benefits, whatever benefits we need to help them get back on their feet. We do various other activities that make them socially active again. We have Girl Scouts come in. We have Boy Scouts come in. People give out donations, games, all kinds of events.

But the most important part we try to instill in them is that you are worth it because a lot of them lose their self-worth. You know, I myself lost my self-worth, but I retained my self-worth. I was able to go through the treatment program, address my substance abuse issues, go back to school, get an Associate's Degree in business administration, go back to school again, get a certification of -- in counseling for alcohol and substance abuse, and I now try to utilize those skills and my personal experience to help others better their lives because I'm a veteran too, and if I can't reach down and grab you up, then I'm not doing my job, and that's what we try to do. We try to take every veteran that we run into, and we try to reach down, grab them, and pull them up, because our motto to is "Leave nobody behind," and even if you do make it home and you don't get the service that you deserve, then we still left you behind. And we just want to make sure that every veteran that comes homes has that opportunity because he has certain things in his life experience that others don't get or haven't experienced, and he needs that extra care.

We've been very -- got a lot of support from the community and from government, and we definitely appreciate everything that's done for us, and we hope to continue to have your support in all the things that we try to do to help veterans become successful in life once again.

Thank you, again, for allowing us to speak, and I'm going to give it back to Mike.

MR. STOLZ:

Thank you. I'll ask Mike and Jeff to come forward. They have used our program, and they can tell

you a little more firsthand, like Will did, about their experiences.

MR. OPATOVSKY:

I'll go first. My name is Mike Opatovsky. I served '93 to '98 at the 106 out in Westhampton Beach. After that, I worked off and on for Ralph Lauren, and about a year and a half ago, my apartment had flooded out. I had black mold. The town had pretty much deemed the place unlivable. I was running a small internet business out of the apartment, and I lost all my paperwork, medical, all the things that I was -- the equipment I was using, my computers, and I ended up moving to a hotel. And at the same time, my mother, who was an Air Force Vet and Department of Defense, was dying in Florida, and I kind of didn't get a chance to get down there in time. Sorry. But I ended up staying at a hotel for 10 months and liquidating almost all of my assets just to pay the rent, and if it wasn't for this program, I really don't even know where I'd be right now, so I'm just very thankful. That's it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And we are too. Thank you for being with us today. Thank you for your service.

MR. BAILEY:

Good afternoon. My name is Jeffrey, and I'm an Air Force Veteran. I came to the -- came to the Vets place back in June from a job that I lost over in Patchogue, and they took me in and took very good care of me. I have nothing but gratitude for the program from the very top to the very bottom. After I got there, instantly I noticed that there was plenty, plenty of resources to help us out, and there was a lot of moral support there as well; it's still there, as you can see the reflection that they were telling you themselves. There was the fatherhood program that helped me get certified in being able to reconnect with my children, strengthening connections during a crisis, during a bad time. There's a writing program that was there that was able to help me put my skills -- hone my skills in creative writing; that has helped me. Then there's transportation -- transportation -- transportation to get to wherever I need to go to take care of my business so I can get back up.

There's a program that I recently got into back in August. It's called a V-RAP program, Veterans Retraining Assistance Program, and I was able to access that program through this program, and I'm still in it today, and I'm doing nothing but benefitting. Right now, I live in a home that Ms. Joanne just explained to you about, and my independence is just becoming closer and closer to being on top. So I have nothing but praise, nothing but gratitude. I wouldn't be here, if it wasn't for the program, talking to you now. I went through all of that pretty fast. Thank you for listening.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you for being with us today, and, of course, thank you for your service. And let me ask you a question, because as you point out, there are outstanding services that are being provided by some of the best organizations that we have here locally for our veterans and their families, but too often, we know that not enough of our veterans take advantage of the programs that are available. So let me ask you, how did you come to learn of the program? And maybe you can share with us some of the reasons why you founded -- had the ability to pursue those programs while so many of our veterans just don't take advantage of the services that are available.

MR. BAILEY:

It's the -- what Mr. Wilkens just said to you. The case -- the case management. Everyone that comes through there has their own separate case, and we have a lady there, working there, Roberta Sharpe, and she sees everybody individually to get them on track, to help them get taken care, just about everything -- every aspect of their life, really. I mean, the woman is an angel. She listens. She helps.

But the one thing, to answer your question more directly, John comes by, and he's always talking to the veterans, letting them know, pushing them up to take advantage. Will is constantly, constantly

telling everyone, everyone that comes through the Vets place, "Look, we are here to help you pick yourself up, and you're going to get up. We're going to make sure you get up. We're not going to let go. But if you let go, if you not trying to help yourself, then how can we help you?" So you got to be able to help yourself, and so, therefore, there are so many programs that come through that are there that you just can't -- you can't help but to come up. There's a lot of positive energy there, and you just can't walk away from it. You got to grab onto something, and I try to grab on as much as I can. Does that answer your question? Okay.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

At this point, how many veterans do you provide some level of assistance to?

MR. YOUNG:

Sixty.

MR. STOLZ:

Right now, through our housing program is 60, then we have other programs. There's Joanne, where we're talking about, that are offsite around, you know, transportation and food pantry. We help dozens of other veteran families. Obviously, you know about the Dwyer Peer-to-Peer Programs. So 60 through this core program and then kind of fanning out to others.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director Ronayne earlier had mentioned that we don't have this year's number yet being compiled on our homeless veterans, but if you look at the outstanding services that you provide, and you know that that number, once we get it, is going to be an unacceptably high number, how can all of us ensure that your services are offered to those that are in need of them? And what do you -- really, anyone who would like to chime in with an answer -- how do we not only provide those services but help to ensure that so many in our community who are in need are aware of those services and ultimately take the steps necessary to take advantage of them?

MR. STOLZ:

Well, I'll tell you, there is a tight network of -- there are a lot of veterans service organizations, and there are increasingly terrific communication a lot because of this gentleman, where, you know, his staff of case managers know a lot of resources, know the eligibility for different resources probably better than anybody. It's a very complicated maze for veterans out there. And we talk to each other, some through the VA, some through other places, and we're able to kind of discern what goes on.

Plus, as you all know, there's a large number of veterans in Suffolk County. There's a large number of veteran families in Suffolk County, and families talk to each other, and that's huge. So Jeff was talking about Roberta. Roberta was a case manager with Clubhouse of Suffolk. Her husband is a Vietnam Veteran and still extremely active in the VFW, so Roberta got to know a lot of her resources, personal and professional, because of those kinds of connections. So it's a combination of, you know, kind of professional and family-to-family that makes it all home.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I really can't add very much more to what Mike had just shared. The -- a lot of what we do to help get the word out to the community is nontraditional. A lot of it is the outreach, the veterans service organizations, a lot of the not-for-profits that we have within the network throughout the County. Quite honestly, a great deal of it is simply, you know, shoe leather. It is going to where the people are. If there's an event, if there's a concert, we'll have somebody milling about in the crowd; go to the beaches, go to the parks, bowling alleys, diners, supermarkets, anywhere where you'll find people, you'll find veterans. We're not always the easiest group to outreach to, and sometimes we resist coming in, asking for help. No matter how minimal that assistance might be, we tend to not embrace assistance as a population.

So being out there as a part of the community and sort of just being present and then that person finally decides that it is time to ask that question and to extend their hand and ask for somebody to help them find their way through something. But it's a lot of shoe leather is really the most effective method.

I didn't get up to speak about that again. I really only got up to stress that in addition to the numbers that Mike had cited with regard to the population that they serve, the Peer-to-Peer Program, inclusive now of the nine members of this new group that I was informed of today, is another mid-40s, so the number of veterans engaged in the Peer-to-Peer Program now is between 40 and 50, so that 40 to 50 is not included in the 60 that Mike had cited a moment ago.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

What would you say the age ranges are of those that you serve? Are they predominantly younger veterans, are they predominantly older veterans, or is it really a broad spectrum?

MR. YOUNG:

It's a broad spectrum right now, but right now our population is basically -- --

MS. ORTIZ:

I'm sorry. Could you speak in the microphone?

MR. YOUNG:

In the past, it's basically been like Vietnam Veterans, Korean Veterans, but over the last, I'd say, year and a half, two years, we're getting a lot of (indiscernible). But, you know, change, not being able to adapt to the change, families not able to adapt to the different changes in them, not knowing what to do. PTSD/TBI, it's a lot about what they're coming back suffering from. Like Vietnam -- war is war, but as we know, locations create different situations, different circumstances, and different conditions often produces different results. And we find now that due to the way the war was being fought in Afghanistan and Iraq, it's a little different than Vietnam, so there's a little more of immediate impact on what's going on. And plus a lot of guys, that significance when you're dealing with reserve, I'm in, I'm out, I'm in, I'm out. Know what I mean? Two, three times, four times, and I mean so it's that psychological effect that comes back, comes back to haunt them, not being able to adjust to the dramatic change on a constant basis, but we're starting to get a lot of the younger guys coming in.

For me, based on my 13 years of experience at this, it's a good thing because now we're able to deal with it before it gets to the point of them losing everything, and that's one of the good things I can say about that, you know, because Vietnam veterans, everything is like years later. You know what I mean? Now these guys are coming in, 19, 23, 22, 24, things of that nature, and trying to get their lives together pretty good. So I'm starting to see that we're starting to go closer to a younger generation of veterans right now.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

I just wanted to personally thank everyone here that's within this program. I know Peer-to-Peer, I think, is going to be especially important because they will be able to relate to those people that were in the same position that they're in, and it's sort of like, you know, they're caught up in this river that they're trying to get out of, and you're providing these stones for them to step onto. But they have to take your hand, as you mentioned, and pull themselves up as much as you're trying to pull them out of it, so it has got to be so difficult.

It also, you know, it makes me concerned. I'm a daughter of a disabled vet and my uncle and grandfather are all veterans. It just doesn't seem like -- I'll just say this: I would hope the

government can do more for veterans after deployment, and I know multiple deployments seem to be an issue. You know, again, the mental -- to be able to adjust, like you had said, you would think they would have some type of preparation prior to leaving the military to do that, so I guess that's the question. Do you know, is there any type of preparation that our military is given to help prepare -- and I know Tom and I had discussed this before -- but to the extent that they need the counselling?

MR. YOUNG:

Yes, I must say that they have devised a program now that when veterans are leaving, that it is a lot more -- how can I say it -- educational, as it was, say, when I got out. When I got out, they was like, "Here's your DD 214. Here's this right here. Here's Fort Dix. You catch this trip, bus to get to this train station, and there you go. Now there's a process you have to go through before you get this choice. But the thing of it is that even though you ask the question, do you get the right answers? See, that's the thin line we have to worry about crossing, you know what I mean? If a guy is getting ready to go home and you ask him a particular question that could possibly jeopardize him leaving, is he going to give you the answer that he needs to give you, or is he going to give you the answer that he wants to give you. And a lot of it comes from, you know -- I hate to say it, but it's the truth -- the honesty of the veteran with himself, okay? And some guys are coming back to work, and they're in fields of -- areas that require some security clearances and certain recommendation and if I leave here and I say, I got this particular problem. Am I going have a job when I get home? So if I handle this question this way, what are going to be the consequences? So I do what I normally do and what we are taught to do: I tough it out. You know what I mean? I can handle it. I deal with what I need to deal with.

But there is a process that I think has drastically improved over the past. What I think is that we, the veterans today, have to make a decision, you know what I mean, because even if you don't say the right answer and you go back out there, how long is it going to last, you know what I mean? How long are you going to be able to keep that job when you know you're going home and you can't sleep at night, and you've got to be responsible with other people's lives. So there is a program that's out there. It's just a matter of, you know, how you go about utilizing it. There's always room for improvement; don't get me wrong.

MR. STOLZ:

Your question is incredibly poignant on many levels because you're really going toward, well, what's the role of the County, essentially, that you got forced into or you become to be able to help our returning veterans who may not have been as well educated, and we have kind of a unique kind of a set of things going on, converging right now with our PTSD support groups where we have some young vets coming in who are discussing exactly that, you know, kind of what happened to me, what was my military experience, how was it handled or how wasn't it handled, and where do I turn when I'm here.

As Tom has talked about, we have, unfortunately, we've convened a military suicide task force which is going to ask the same kinds of questions, what happened, and we have the same prism to be able to look through for our homeless veterans to say, How come? You know, you've gone from serving our country to now go through where you've lost all our assets, you are without support, and now you're in this position. So there clearly is a lot for us to look at, and I think you're hitting it right on the nose.

LEG. ANKER:

Again, my kudos or my thanks to everybody here is who is part of the process because, like you had said earlier, if you don't -- we're all part of this chain and if there's one link broken, then it's going be a problem. So again word of mouth, boots on the ground, all those important steps being taken, and, again, one step at a time, but I would love to see this move as fast as we can because there's a lot of lives we need to change for the better. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And to everyone, thank you. Thank you for your commitment to our veterans, to their families, and for all the great work that you do, and thank you for your service as well, for being with us today.

MR. STOLZ:

Thank you for giving us the opportunity.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

We do have another item on our agenda. We have a procedural motion.

PMO1, Designating Veterans Organizations to receive funding for Memorial Day Observances for 2013 (Stern).

I'll make a motion to approve.

LEG. ANKER:

Second.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All those in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? PMO1 is approved. **(Approved, 4-0-0-1, Not Present: Barraga)**

And, just lastly, let me note for the record Legislator Barraga is not with us today. He has an excused absence.

All right. Thank you, everyone.

(Meeting was adjourned at 1:59 p.m.)