

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 April 15, 2013 at 1:00 p.m.

Members Present:

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

Also In Attendance:

George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature
Renee Ortiz - Chief Deputy Clerk
Michael Pitcher - Aide to Presiding Officer Lindsay
Paul Perillie - Aide to Legislator Gregory
Kevin LaValle - Aide to Legislator Muratore
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veteran's Services
Sheana Morris - Veterans Service Officer
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Office for the Aging
Rick Brand - Newsday
Beth Delli-Pizzoi - President, Family Readiness Group, Fighting 69th
Tiffany Gentile - Family Readiness Group, Fighting 69th
Sergeant Ted Gentile
Andrew Gentile
Vicki Fleming - 4-H Youth Development Program
Maureen Montrose - Project Hope
Erick Dreher - Project Hope
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken By:

Gabrielle Skolom - Court Stenographer

Minutes Transcribed By:

Gabrielle Skolom - Court Stenographer
Kim Castiglione - Legislative Secretary

*(*The meeting was called to order at 1:10 p.m. *)*

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the committee on Veterans and Seniors. Can I ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge led by Legislator Muratore.

*(*Salutation*)*

I'll 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 in our thoughts and prayers. I'd also like to recognize the passing of Amy Maniscalco, who was just a tremendous leader in the veterans community, having organized our support network, leaving us way too soon at the age of 37. We keep Amy and her family in our thoughts and prayers as well.

*(*Moment of Silence Observed*)*

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Again, welcome, everyone. We have several special guests with us today. Before we go to them, let's have Holly. Why don't you come on up? Not that you're not a very special guest as well.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I only have a couple things because I know you're busy. The first one is we've been keeping an eye on the sequestration and the impact it will have on our office. Unofficially, I have been told some numbers from the State Office for the Aging. They're not official yet, but it looks like we may be losing about \$100,000 to the sequestration. We believe we'll be able to take those cuts and use carryover funds to try to, you know, keep the cuts from really hurting any of the programs. That's what we're hoping for. If it's more than \$100,000, I might have some difficulty, or if sequestration cuts continue on year after year, then that would probably show as a \$100,000 cut someplace in programs, but right now I think we're okay for this year.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly, going through this process, did you have an expectation on a number? Is that number lower, is it higher than you expected, or did you really not have a --

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

It's actually a little odd, the way they did it, because, for example, it looks like home-delivered meals received a cut, which is always confounding to me because that's the one where we really have a lot of weight, even on the Federal level. I'm surprised. There's less funding for that program than there is for congregate meals. Congregate meals, they took no cuts. I don't know how the cuts were done, but unofficially what I've seen, it's not uniform throughout every program that they have taken the cuts, so it's a little odd to me, but that's what we're going to live with if they come to be the way that I'm looking at them.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

In what department did they make that determination?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

You know, I think it comes from the Older Americans Act, what programs they cut, and then it came to the State, and I think, actually, for some of the smaller programs, I think the State is going to try to take the cut and not send it down the counties for a couple of tiny programs. But it's, again, everything I have seen so far is unofficial, so I'm not really sure until I get the official notification and grant awards how that's going to play out, but we -- you know, I'm hoping that I don't have to have any impact on the programs with it. So that's the one thing.

And then the other thing I just wanted to mention is that our office is focusing on doing some more emergency planning, you know, after Hurricane Sandy and the snowstorms and everything else that we've been hit with over the last couple of years. We looked at our assessments that we use for home-delivered meal clients, for our case managers -- for our case management clients, and also for our adult daycare clients that we do some funding for that we really needed to add some questions in the assessment about what they are going to do for emergency planning, because what happens very frequently -- and I know, as Legislators, I'm sure you get the phone calls the day after a snowstorm, "Who is going to shovel me out?" There's never anybody who can shovel somebody out. You tell them to try to go to the churches, you try -- do you have a kid in the neighborhood, that kind of thing.

But what we have found is that nobody really makes a plan, so at least as part of the assessment -- and the assessment's a pretty large tool. You know, it's 25 pages that they have to fill out with 1,000 questions, so what's another four or five questions, is how I look at it. And, really, the questions that we're adding are really just to have them have a conversation with their caseworker as to what are they thinking is going to happen when they have a snowstorm. So we're adding some questions, you know, are they dependent on electric for medical needs, you know, in the event of a weather emergency, you know, who do you rely on for basic needs, you know, the food, the water, the batteries, the flashlights. You know, if they had to be evacuated, do they have transportation; if not, have they given any thought as to who they would call.

You know, I don't know if some of these people have a plan, but if they're not -- if they don't have anybody to assist them with all these kinds of things -- and we also have one on snow, you know, that if you can't shovel -- if you can't mow your own lawn, you probably can't shovel your own snow. So if you make plans for your grass to be mowed, then you really need to make plans for the snow to be removed, so try to get them to think ahead that they may have to spend some money on doing that.

But all of these questions would really lead up to, then, are you included on any special registries? You know, Suffolk County has the registry for people who, in the event of an emergency, might need to be evacuated. And so, really those questions are trying to get to that point, and then we can assist them in applying to be on a registry. And as part of that, as well, we are working with the Department of Health and with Fire, Rescue and Emergency Services. DOH had received a small grant from NACHO, the Association of County Health Departments, and they have asked us to work on that grant with them to try to expand the use of the registry, so we're working with them on that as well. So we really are focusing quite a bit on the emergency planning as we move forward.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly, one of the concerns and one of the efforts that we've been making for quite some time is to try and increase the number of our neighbors that register for these kinds of programs, particularly the JEEP program, the Joint Emergency Evacuation Program; and so to get information about who is on and who is not yet on but who thinks they may need to be on that list would be valuable information. Do you foresee a situation where a caseworker may actually, during the course of meeting with a client, take into the process of actually making the call or sending the e-mail, whatever is necessary to go through the application process? Is that a service that we provide now, and if not, is it something we can do going forward?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

You know, over the past 15 years since JEEP actually was implemented -- I mean, we've had JEEP out there, caseworkers know about it, but quite honestly, it was kind of -- I don't know -- an underutilized program for a lot of reasons. Now that FRES has it up and running with it being online and having the volunteers who could make a lot of phone calls during the events of emergency and really having it become fully functional, you know, we are now trying to get the caseworkers to use

it and use it wisely with the clients that we have; so yes, I do see that we will be helping to get people on that program if they're eligible for it. And, as I believe FRES told me, is that anybody can be on the registry, but depending on what they say their needs are, would depend on if they're told where they might be listed as eligible for a general purpose shelter and no transportation needed, which could be anybody, you know, but the focus for us are really those people who need the transportation or those who have the special needs, that they really shouldn't be home in the event of an emergency on their own.

So we are working towards that, so it's exciting. It's a little bit more work, but I think we have to do it. I think people don't think about what's going to happen when there's an emergency, and we've seen that quite clearly over the last couple of years, so that's our new focus.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

Hi, Holly. Again, thank you for your report. My district, District 6, has so many PRC's, planned retirement communities and senior villages, Leisure Village, Knoll. Is there -- and I know we had discussed this at another -- at a former meeting, but is there a program, or what is your thoughts as far as getting all the different communities together to have maybe FRES present to them as far as an emergency plan? Because what had happened was I was getting calls from Leisure Village saying, "We are trapped in our house," and it is a terrible feeling to be trapped inside, but, of course, everybody was trapped inside.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Are you talking for the snowstorm?

LEG. ANKER:

During the snowstorm, yes. And I went ahead and called their security services, because their office was closed, and somehow I was able to get their security to come and check on them. But as far as I know, I don't know, is there a standard emergency plan for senior communities?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I don't believe there probably is, but I also would think that their management team -- I mean, if they're supposed to provide snow shoveling of the walks and of their roads within the community, because every community has their own different restrictions and obligations and they would have to know what they are. So that's really incumbent on the people as they sign in to move into these places, that they know what they are obligated to do on their own and what the community is obligated to do for them, and I know there's probably a wide range in what that is.

LEG. ANKER:

I think the problem was that even the security people didn't know who to call for -- well, I mean they have, you know, the emergency services, but I'm just wondering is there a way to connect them with a more refined plan as far as each organization? So there's really nothing set up at this point?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Not that I know of. I mean, for the individual who's frail and needs more assistance, that's what I would say that the registry is for that Suffolk County has. For an entire community, I mean, that's really, they would have to know what the obligation of the community, the people who run the community, what their obligation is. We do get a lot of calls from people saying, you know, they haven't shoveled my walks, they haven't done this, they haven't done that. You know, that's a homeowner, that's a tenant -- what is it called? The tenant/landlord type thing.

LEG. ANKER:

It would be in their contract.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Right.

LEG. ANKER:

It would be an understanding with their homeowners' association. I'm assuming that's what you mean.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Correct.

LEG. ANKER:

Yeah. Okay. Well, again, thank you for your report. Appreciate it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly, thank you. Welcome, Director Ronayne.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good afternoon. Thank you, as always, for the invitation. I always seem to follow Holly. That's always a tough thing to do. Before I get into my report this afternoon, I would like to very happily take the opportunity to introduce the committee to Ms. Sheana Morris, who is our newest Veterans Service Officer. We hired Sheana, and she came aboard and started in our office in Hauppauge last Monday, so she's officially on board. We are already in the process of scheduling her first County deployment. She'll be going away for training for a while, and that will be the beginning of the path toward accreditation. But Ms. Morris brings to us a six-year history of service in the U.S. Army. She was an E5 Sergeant. And without my trying to tell too much of her story, maybe I'll just give her an opportunity to introduce herself to you and give you a little bit of a sense of her background and what she brings to the office going forward.

MS. MORRIS:

Yes, as he already stated, my name is Sheana Morris, and, yes, I have six years in the U.S. Army, most of which was in the 82nd Airborne Division in North Carolina. I am a mom. I live in Huntington Station, and I hope to have great things to -- I don't know -- to bring to the Veterans Service Agency. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Well, thank you for being with us today, and we look forward to working with you going forward, and, of course, thank you not only for being here but for your service to our nation.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I know it can be a little intimidating sometimes coming into this room for the first time. I just felt that it was important for everybody to meet the new service officer and know that we are continuing to move forward.

A few things. I guess the first thing that I will report on is the continued progress in a very forward direction of the Joseph Dwyer PTSD Peer-to-Peer Program. As I had reported at the last committee, we had received some outstanding news. The program has, in fact, been expanded by New York State. It has gone from a pilot program consisting of four counties and a total budget of \$800,000. It has now been expanded to 11 counties in New York State, and the budget has grown to \$2.3 million. So I think that's a testament to the accomplishments that we've seen in the short time that the program has been in place in Suffolk County. To quote one of our state senators during one of

our recent trips to Albany, Suffolk County are the rock stars in Peer-to-Peer. So we were very happy to have been able to play a role in providing an awareness to the rest of the state about the importance of this type of a program and the ability of the program to outreach to such a significant segment of our veteran population who, for any number of reasons, as we've discussed in the past, choose by choice or for other reason, not to pursue other more conventional services primarily at V.A. So again, we're very happy. We are delighted that the program has been continued.

We have two things of significance going forward at this point. One of them is that we have already begun discussion, hopefully that we will be able to begin to work with our corporate private sector partners and identify funding streams that are potentially accessible to us to continue the program beyond this year ideally with private sector funds supporting us at least in an equal share to our public funds. In a perfect world, if we could get away from using government dollars altogether and have the program become self-sustaining in that regard, it would be a dream. But we've already begun those conversations. We've got one corporation in particular that we've already been able to access is entertaining our request to request a proposal from them, and we'll keep you posted on that.

The other one is, given the fact that we have been of the four counties in the original pilot program, we were the first county to launch and we have since developed, A, the largest number of groups in place. We're serving also the largest number of veterans of any of those four programs, and as a result of that, we've agreed that in an effort to provide the new counties who have been added to the program an opportunity to not necessarily take our model and continue on with our model in their locales, but to perhaps just get a sense, a better sense of understanding of what we do and how we do it, even the lessons learned, things that we've tried that have not been ideally suited to the program. So we'll be having a conference. I'm hoping to host the conference in Suffolk County. The conference will be representatives of all the other 10 counties, Suffolk being the 11th. I'd like to bring it down here. I know there will be some pushback on that. Everybody, for some reason, seems to like to have these things in, you know, Albany-ish areas, but we're going to make a case to have them come down here hopefully around June and, A, teach them how to do peer-to-peer work, and, B, we'll show them around and expose them to the tourism opportunities on Long Island. Hopefully, they'll bring those messages back to their counties as well.

Following sort of in the same path, we did have a meeting of the County Executive's suicide -- Veterans and Military Suicide Prevention Task Force. We met about two and a half weeks ago. It was a very productive meeting. We had a couple of new members who, I think, very well rounded out the panel. Those new members specifically, and I want to thank her publicly for accepting my invitation and agreeing to join us, was Dr. Milewski, our Medical Examiner, who, unfortunately, the Medical Examiner brings a great deal of depth and knowledge to this issue and having her be willing to be included in this panel is a big step forward for us.

The other new addition to the panel was V.A. We had V.A. senior staff at the last meeting. They have agreed to continue to participate in this process and work as partners in identifying and better serving this population toward an end of being able to more effectively understand, recognize, identify and hopefully intervene in these cases.

We do have a training taking place tomorrow. Our entire peer team will be in. I have one representative, the Suicide Prevention Coordinator, Nancy Olsen, from V.A. is also sitting in on our training tomorrow, and we've got about seven people from other affiliated organizations who we thought it was appropriate to allow them access to our training given that they are partners in our efforts. So the training will take place tomorrow. It's a half-day training, this one. This will be our third suicide training. We will be scheduling a fourth. As I've told you in the past, we do a formal training once per month. For this month, it will be a suicide-specific training. Again, redundancy is a great thing in many places, certainly training being one of them. When we're dealing with these

complex cases where we have suicidal potential, it's great to have a base of training such that the redundancy of it has created, for lack of a better word, almost muscle memory, that we have done it and been through it enough times that we react instinctively and not, so to speak, have to go back to the book.

This is a very real issue. We have had two callouts since we last met. One of the other staff went out on one; I went out on two visits for the same veteran who ultimately was a drug overdose. He was taken by ambulance to a -- not to Northport but to another V.A. hospital, and we're anxious to be kept in the loop as far as his recovery, and we hope that he fares well, but this issue is just not going away. We are -- I'm very thankful for all of you for all of your support in helping us get to a point where we're approaching it and addressing it proactively, and, you know, we're not reacting to getting the calls after the fact. We're trying to figure out and identify ways, means, and methods of going forward and doing this in a way that we can help some folks and not react to crisis.

I have also been invited -- and this is an annual conference. This will be the first time that we have been invited. I'm very happy that we have been recognized. It's a National Homeless Veterans Advocacy Conference in Washington at the end of May. It's sponsored by V.A. and Department of Defense, and the fact that they have chosen to include us this year, I'm very happy with.

You know, I know in these fiscal times, we all question every time we see a conference attendance form, is it necessary for us to go out of town, is it necessary for us to incur the expenses of these types of trainings; and all I'll say is I think we've demonstrated very, very conclusively that when we are effective in our homeless veteran outreach efforts, every veteran that we can bring in off the street and ideally if they are or are not enrolled in some sort of V.A. service, Medicaid, or Medicare, if I can take that veteran from whatever his situation is, and I take that veteran and I transfer his care to V.A., aside from the ethical and the moral responsibility that we have to treat this population, from a practical perspective, we have deferred all of the local expense with regard to caring and treating that veteran and taking it out of the local area of responsibility and diverted it entirely to the V.A. So the expense of caring and treating for that veteran becomes entirely a Federal burden, which results in significant savings for us. We all know what the cost of care is on Long Island. So for every veteran that we can effectively treat and extend services to, the savings to Suffolk County are significant. If we rescue one veteran from homelessness over the course of an entire year, it will more than offset the cost of the conference to the County. So I think it's money very well-spent, but again, I'm primarily just very happy that they have seen at this point to include us in the invitation to that training, and that'll be May 29, 30, and 31 in Washington.

We have had a soft opening. We've been discussing for a while now the inclusion of Stony Brook University as a part of our extended family with regard to Veterans Services. We have now had a soft opening of the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency satellite office at Stony Brook. We are on the campus. We have an office now located in the main lobby of the Long Island State Veterans Home. It's been extremely well-received. It's been very well-received by the management. In fact, I've had nothing but compliments and praise for the function of the office, the level of service that we're providing and their regrets that we had not done this many years ago, so that's working out very nicely. I invite any of you at any time to pop in unannounced. Makes no difference. We'll always be prepared for you, but we again are having great successes in Stony Brook, and that satellite office does not serve only the population of student faculty at Stony Brook and the residents of the nursing home; it is also a community office. It's open to the entire community, so anybody who is geographically located in that area, it potentially allows them the ability to avoid having to make a trip to Hauppauge or Riverhead.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, how is that staffed? How often is it open?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

It's one man right now, five days a week full-time.

I have had, and this, Legislator Anker, is a follow-up to a question that I know you have raised several times and Chairman Stern's staff has been in contact with me on several occasions as a follow-up to a national report that was done by the, what is known as the DCOE, the Defense Center of Excellence. The report was discussed at a previous committee regarding the trend toward military suicide and accidental death among military personnel and veterans. I had taken exception to a couple of issues on the report, primarily that it was published as a national study, yet only 21 states had data cited in the report. They chose to publish the report without waiting for data to have been submitted from all of the other states, and significantly none of the top five states in terms of veterans population: California, Texas, Florida, Pennsylvania, or New York. There was no data included from any of these five states in the report. For that reason, I personally find the findings suspect. I don't know that they necessarily address the specific concerns that we have in this region; and for that reason, and as a follow-up to Legislator Anker's concerns, we are preparing letters. Quite honestly, we are trying to figure out exactly who the letter has to go to, but we are preparing letters to go -- to specifically request that any data that may have been submitted post-publication of that report that relates to our region be provided; and also if certain criteria were not examined, that they be examined and that we be given access to the information that results from those inquiries. As that develops, I'll keep you informed.

Quite honestly, there were just so many agencies involved at the Federal level. We're not entirely clear on who the actual submission has to go to. I've already reached out to the DCOE to ask them if it's Department of Defense, is it V.A., is it Army. I know Army routinely handles the publication of suicide and death reports for all five branches, so as soon as we clarify that one issue, this will go out.

LEG. ANKER:

I wanted to also mention, I know you said Suffolk County is a rock star with the Peer-to-Peer. Well, Tom, you're the lead singer. I want to thank you. That just popped in my mind. You're amazing, and if it wasn't for you, the programs would not be happening, so we really appreciate it.

As far as who to address the letter to, because, again, our committee has been working on the letter, and we're going to get that out, but I would send it to the Department of Defense and to our President. That's really where it should go to. I remember, you know, I was told when you get on an airplane and things happen, you write to the President; you write to the person in charge, so that would be my input on that. But, again, thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Duly noted. Thank you. And thank you.

LEG. ANKER:

Oh, you're welcome.

(The following was transcribed by Kim Castiglione, Legislative Secretary)

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Most of the other issues are housekeeping. We've had a couple of great things. The weather has been cooperating so we've had some great events. I participated this weekend in a -- I'm limited, though my participation was I did participate in the 24 hour endurance walk/run to benefit veterans. It was held out in Riverhead. That was great and they included a car show and some other events of interest to the community to help attract people out to the program. They had live music and a DJ for the entire 24 hours that the program ran from 2 p.m. Saturday through 2 p.m. Sunday. Just

some good things happening in the community. I'm very happy to report that mostly, largely right now everything seems to be pretty good. We have more help, which I'm preaching to the choir. You know I've always made it clear that, you know, the more help we have the better job we can do. So I thank you for your support in assisting us in obtaining the funding in the budget line to add the additional staff as well. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Well, Tom, as always, thank you. Thank you for being here and thank you for your outstanding leadership. The Peer-to-Peer Program, as you report, continues to be a model, not just here regionally, but throughout the State.

I have a question for you. The additional funding, which is to bring additional counties in to be able to provide these services, and you had made the announcement that we were going to continue to receive our funding going forward. The amount that Suffolk County is receiving, does that amount remain the same regardless of the fact that additional funds have been added to the program? Do those additional funds just simply cover the new counties coming into the program or is there a change in the amount that Suffolk County is going to be receiving to continue to provide the great service that we do.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Suffolk County will receive \$200,000, as will each of the other counties. There's another component of the contract as there was last year. Ten percent of each county's award will be going to the SUNY Albany School of Social Welfare to continue to do their evaluative studies and their research program on this program. We had, as you're aware, submitted a request that when the funds were allocated, when they were dispersed, that the funding be dispersed based on the veteran population in the County that was being funded. I was hoping that the funds would be distributed equitably and not equally based on our population, we being by far the county with the largest population of veterans, would have received a larger share. Unfortunately, that did not find its way into the legislation, so the disbursement is for equal shares of the money by each of the 11 counties plus some additional fees going to SUNY Albany.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, do you know if the funding aspect is going to be part of the process that they follow at the school as they go through their analysis and quantify the success of the program, or is it merely going to be substantive and not necessarily examine the funding aspect of it.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The funding component I don't think can be extracted from the practical application of the program. If we don't have adequate funds we can't continue to develop and grow the program beyond a certain point. We'll hit a certain point in wherever it is where we won't be able to expand. If at that point we are able to identify that the need to serve continues to be greater than our ability to serve, then SUNY would incorporate that into their reporting. We've already had discussions with SUNY on the nature of how the funds are being allocated, but that's part of an Albany process that I thankfully am not a part of.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I want to thank my colleagues with us today for wearing their purple as a show of support for our

military families, particularly children of our men and women who are serving our great nation. And so we are pleased to have several guests with us today to talk about their organizations, the great work that they do, particularly what they plan on doing coming up to help celebrate the children of our service members. With that, let's have Beth, why don't you guys come on up.

MS. DELLI-PIZZI:

Good afternoon. I'm Beth Delli-Pizzi and I am head of the Long Island Family Readiness Group for the Fighting 69th here on Long Island. I have with me today I think a typical military family and then a military child. I have Sergeant Ted Gentile and his wife, Tiffany Gentile, and their son Andrew. Sergeant Gentile is with Delta Company 169. Our units are now in the new Federal Reserve Center in Farmingdale. So the 69th, we have three units there: Bravo Company, Delta Company and Fox Company. So I don't know if you have seen the new facility but it is really quite an amazing facility, and to have us all in one location has been a task in and of itself. On any given weekend, you know, the Coast Guard could be there, the Army Reserve, the Coast Guard Reserve. We had drill this weekend and our soldiers actually went down to New Jersey, but on any given weekend there could be as many as 1400 soldiers at the facility.

We do try to do a lot of activities there. Tiffany is now head of the Family Readiness Group for Delta Company. When the soldiers came back from New Jersey yesterday they had a spaghetti dinner and sold the dinner to soldiers with beverages and dessert for I think five dollars. Did very well, and that money, you know, goes to the Family Readiness Group to conduct our different activities.

Because our soldiers are not on a deployment cycle right now we don't have a lot of money coming in from different organizations and agencies, so we're forced to do such things as bake sales, fundraisers, so that we can have money in our accounts to do -- right now we do about two activities a year. We do a large Christmas party and then also a family day in the summer.

We are working right now with Coleman Country Day Camp, who has helped us the last two years and given us their campground to have the summer picnic, which is great, so we will be doing that again this year. And we are very excited about an event coming up this weekend. Monster Mini Golf is sponsoring a day for all military kids to come and play. And it was great, they did it as well last year, and it was really quite something for our military families.

And I would like to just say thank you to Tom Ronayne as well and the Peer-to-Peer counseling. A couple of our soldiers from the 69th are involved in it. They're actually doing some of the counseling, and a lot of our at risk soldiers are using it and it has been tremendous to them. There's still the stigma, I think, with a lot of our soldiers in crisis about going to the V.A., so this is just an additional source that is helping them tremendously, so it's a great program.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Beth, as always it's great to see you, and thanks so much for being with us today. I'm wondering if you had any comment, or anybody else that's here with us today, about what we can be doing here at the County level of government to help get that type of information out. Director Ronayne and his staff continue to do an outstanding job and they do a really tremendous effort in getting the word out and making their outreach efforts. Would you have any opinion on what we can and should be doing at the County level of government to help facilitate this information so that we can get the right services to, you know, to the right men and women in our community who have the need.

MS. DELLI-PIZZI:

I think, you know, a lot of it is getting out, a lot of it for the soldier is word to word. I think in the events that we have like the summer picnic, for instance. Tom comes to -- like big events like that that we have Tom is always there and he has fliers and people going around, so it helps get the

word out that way. But I think to Sergeant Gentile we have a few times a year like job fairs or different type of events that vendors come into the armory, and it's, you know, on a drill weekend that everybody is there. And so Tom will even come and set up a booth or the Rosen Center, which provides a lot of services to our soldiers as well. So keeping those dates open and coming to events like that is certainly helpful in getting the word out.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I remember very well, this was maybe a couple of years ago now, when I had asked Lou what, you know, what do you see the biggest need is among family members and veterans or soldiers when they return home. Making outreach efforts for medical services, health care, housing. I remember he said then and every time I have asked him the question he continues to say that soldiers returning need job assistance. It is the number one, two and three concerns. So I was wondering if you can share with us what the current sense is among the soldier and veteran community about jobs, employment, unemployment, job fairs as you mentioned, getting the information out on job training and opportunities that are offered, whether it's through the County through our Labor Department, Suffolk County Community College. Is this the kind of information that's getting out there and what do we need to be on the lookout for going forward, particularly when it comes to that issue.

MS. DELLI-PIZZI:

I think as far as jobs these job fairs are very important in getting the employers there. It's often that employers come and everything happens so quickly that the soldiers sort of walk around the room and they not have everything they need. They may not have their resume together. They may not be able to put that resume together based on, look, you know, they served in Afghanistan for a year, and how does that translate into their, you know, resume. So I think the added attention or, you know, classes on resume building and things like that would certainly help. And also the employers always, you know, they want to hire veterans, but then they don't have any openings at the time, so it's -- soldiers, they need jobs now and I guess that's that biggest thing. Or they'll go to the job fair and there will be maybe one or two openings, and so that's where the frustration comes.

I know New York Army National Guard has just started a program, well, it's going to be starting this summer Upstate. It's a one year program that they're doing with one of the colleges up there. I don't know a lot about it. I just heard a little bit about it. We had unfortunately a death of one of our army family a week ago. But it's taking at-risk soldiers and getting them in an environment Upstate and letting them go to college, learn a skill, go to classes on drug abuse, PTSD, and it's -- it has the potential to be something great. And I think that's something maybe, too, that we could do here on Suffolk County with all the wonderful universities that we have, you know, and sort of help these soldiers get some additional training that they may need. Sergeant Gentile might be able to talk about that a little more because he deals with soldiers who are looking for employment.

SERGEANT GENTILE:

We have actually a pretty good program right now with the New York Army National Guard from Upstate that actually on a weekly basis they send out e-mails, job fairs, like Helmets to Hardhats, stuff like that that actually we push out to the soldiers. Some of them have been able to take advantage of it, some they tried but, you know, with scheduling conflicts and everything like that they just can't take advantage of it. But there are, you know, a pretty good amount of programs out there that our soldiers are able to take advantage of.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Barraga.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Let me ask you a question, I just want to get a better idea. When soldiers return from a tour in Afghanistan or in the past Iraq, and they're suffering from anxieties associated with PTSD, is there a reluctance for those soldiers to reach out and seek help or assistance for fear that if it appears on their record their upward mobility in the Army might be limited or the feasibility of getting a good job in the private sector might be hindered. Can you expand on that, Sergeant, what's your experience been with other soldiers? Is there a sense of hesitancy even though they might be suffering from some problems to reach out and seek assistance because they fear that there will be negative consequences in terms of their future?

SERGEANT GENTILE:

Sir, what I've seen so far is some people will go straight to the V.A., try to seek help, and others will try to go like a private route just to make sure it doesn't end up on their record. There were rumors, you know, if you were diagnosed with PTSD that you would fall under, I think it's the Lautengerg Amendment, where you weren't able to bear arms and you'd be actually put out of the military. So some people do seek the private route, some people do go straight to the V.A. We kind of encourage people to go to the V.A. and get the help legitimately rather than trying to go the backdoor way and make sure nobody finds out or anything like that. Other soldiers just don't get any help whatsoever and kind of just deal with it with their friends.

LEG. BARRAGA:

When they don't get any help whatsoever, is that because they're afraid of the negative consequences or possible negative consequences associated with getting help in terms of their future in the Army or their ability to get a good job in the private sector?

SERGEANT GENTILE:

Pretty much. I mean, there's fears of, you know, military downsizing. You know, if I'm diagnosed with PTSD is that going to affect when they start making the cuts, promotions, schools, other deployments. There's always the question of what it's going to affect down the line if they are diagnosed with PTSD.

LEG. BARRAGA:

That in and of itself, you know, lays down real challenges associated with these different programs, because the program could in essence be an excellent program, but if an individual soldier or marine has reservations in terms of their participation having a negative consequence as far as their future is concerned, they don't participate, they don't get engaged, and they continue for many, many years having the same problems.

SERGEANT GENTILE:

Right, absolutely. I mean, we usually try to, you know, encourage them to seek help, you know, work with them, let them know that, you know, just because they need to see somebody or go to a counselor or something like that, that they are not going to be stigmatized or, you know, put on like a blacklist or something like that. We try as like leaders, try to make sure that, you know, they will be taken care of and not really shunned out.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Thank you.

MS. DELLI-PIZZI:

I think on that note, too, I can just give two case scenarios. One is another Sergeant who is in the New York Army National Guard and is awesome. I mean, was in Iraq, was in Afghanistan, and you know, the Army is his life. And he is suffering from PTSD and he is not comfortable at the V.A., so the Rosen Center had just opened a new facility in Bay Shore, which is awesome, so he has sought

to get treatment there. We have another soldier who has a lot of issues, PTSD, drugs, alcohol. Went to the V.A. The VA, there they have the PTSD program. It's difficult to get into, there's not a lot of openings. You can't get right in. He -- when he went there with all kinds of issues, he ended up -- Tom might know the floor. Floor 21 or --

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Unit.

MS. DELLI-PIZZI:

Unit 21. That's a Psychiatric Unit, which this soldier got on the Psychiatric Unit and it was the absolute worst thing in the world for this particular soldier. Flipped out again, ended up getting him out east to a facility out east. He had an issue there. He got kicked out of there and went back to the V.A. and then he was back in the V.A. and signed himself out, you know, after a 72 hour hold. I don't know where -- we're looking for a place for this soldier now. He won't go back to the V.A., he desperately needs help, but he needs drug, alcohol and then PTSD. I think, you know, that's sort of where we are and the at risk soldiers that I see, there needs to be like a facility that they feel comfortable walking in, that can control them and handle it all. I mean of course --

LEG. BARRAGA:

In those two instances at least those soldiers reached out, they knew they needed help and they needed some sort of a program. I guess my concern is the soldier who knows they have a problem but for other reasons will not reach out because they fear negative consequences associated with getting this kind of help and how it affects their future job growth.

MS. DELLI-PIZZI:

Yes.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

One of the other things that we've begun to -- I won't say that we've begun to see, but we've certainly begun to hear more about it, and Sergeant Gentile makes a good point that if you are deemed not fit to bear arms, a soldier, while they are incredibly well trained and have many skill sets and many abilities, at the core of it every soldier is an infantryman, and a soldier who cannot bear arms, a soldier who is not permitted to have a weapon, is in effect not a very useful soldier.

We have begun to hear more and more now that the challenges of convincing the veterans that you are referring to, Legislator Barraga, about at least taking that initial step, going in and taking that initial opportunity to go in and seek some sort of help, some form of service, with the new Safe Act and some of the new gun legislations where medical providers, physicians, are being mandated now to report when patients with psychiatric diagnoses have firearms, we're hearing from active duty, guard and veterans that they are now reluctant to even seek that private sector assistance. Initially it was, "Well, I'm not going to the V.A. because I don't want to risk being classified as no weapons." They would seek outside help. Well, now they're reluctant to seek the outside assistance, so we are trying to come up with yet a third scenario where this population can go and still have a comfort in their anonymity and their desire to keep their private health records separate from their military health records so that they don't find themselves classified as such.

And again, if you've got a soldier with any amount of time in service and any amount of time in uniform, if you turn out to be a no weapons guy, you are suddenly not very retainable and you are talking about people's careers coming to an abrupt end after many years of honorable and faithful service because they chose to seek the help that we would all like for them to pursue. So this issue is actually ironically almost becoming more complex. The harder we work to address the issue it almost seems that we are causing it to be a more complex issue in and of itself.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

As always, thank you for being here and giving us, you know, your information, your experiences, so we can try to make things better. But, again, it just sounds like it's a vicious cycle. It's a -- you know, they experience something that creates a mental illness situation and they're self-medicating with drugs or alcohol and it just perpetuates. So, you know, again, the Peer-to-Peer -- and is the Peer-to-Peer more of a private type of counseling?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Peer-to-Peer is completely private. We do have private sector providers as a part of our program. Our first partner, our go to partner, our partner of choice is and will continue to be V.A., but we recognize that the V.A. is not always an ideal or an appropriate referral for a veteran. We do have private sector providers as a part of our program. Absent an acknowledgement or a self-disclosure for a need to refer to a higher level of service, or absent an observation on the part of one of our facilitators or staff members that a referral to a higher level of service would be appropriate, our program is 100% confidential, so much so that we do not require identification. No DD214, no Armed Forces ID, no driver's license. You are asked when we self-identify as a veteran, and I think the General and Legislator Gregory will agree with me on this. People have questioned the intelligence behind that decision. If we have a group that's intended to serve veterans and service members and we don't ask you to prove that you are, well I can tell you that in a room with ten veterans sitting around a table sharing their issues, sharing their demons, if you will, we can self-police these groups pretty well. It's not long before the other nine guys at the table will decide for themselves that the other person is not who he claims to be. So we have had no instances where people have not been who they claim to be. But, again, the issue of the 100% anonymity has been a real key to appealing and attracting veterans to the program.

LEG. GREGORY:

Just a quick statement.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Gregory.

LEG. GREGORY:

Thank you, Beth, for coming and bringing the families. The Armed Services Center is in my district, so if you ever have an event please feel free to let my office know and I would love to support it, okay?

MS. DELLI-PIZZI:

Absolutely.

LEG. GREGORY:

All right. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Beth, thank you for being with us. As always, please send our best and thank you for everything that you continue to do for our entire community. To Staff Sergeant Gentile, to Tiffany, to Andrew, thank you so much for being us with and of course for your service to our nation. It's good to see you today.

Okay. We welcome today Vicki Fleming of the 4-H Youth Development Program. She is the Director. And we welcome you today for a timely discussion about what we are celebrating, which is

the month of the military child, so we're looking forward to learning more about your services and what you've got going on. Thanks for being with us.

MS. FLEMING:

Thank you. Thank you for having me. I did do a full presentation last year with a PowerPoint so I'm just going to hit some of the main points, because I think most of you were here last year. Operation Military Kids was originally designed by the Army to reach out to suddenly military families that are not directly connected to a military base, because on a military base they get a lot of the services and connections to family. So they initially reached out to organizations that dealt with youth, like Boys and Girls Clubs and 4-H to try to reach out to those families, and in 2011 our local 4-H office was asked to head up the Long Island Regional Support Network so we began doing that.

And just a few numbers for you. There are 43,000 military youth in New York; 15,000 are geographically dispersed; 9,000 are in our regional support network, which goes to New York City and through Nassau County as well; and 1800 are located in Suffolk County. The dates are a couple of years old -- I mean the numbers are a couple of years old.

So we reach out to the youth in families in a number of ways. There's a program called Speak Out Military Kids. It's a way of reaching out to teens to allow them -- to give them a voice on the issues that they're dealing with when a family member is away. Boots On Boots Off is connected to the yellow ribbon events that the FRG leaders do often to help the kids get an idea of what their family is going to face.

There's a mobile technology lab that goes out from our New York State office, and that includes some laptops, robotics kits, STEM related things that occupy the kids, but also tools to do communication, like the laptops and the printers are ways of printing out cards or skyping with their loved ones if they are overseas.

They developed hero packs, which were backpacks which I have brought to you before that, again, carry communication tools. They have a disposable camera, stationary, photo albums, things like that, that the kids would put photos in or gather photos throughout the year or however long their family member is deployed, and then when they come back they can share those things. They've actually kind of switched that concept to a family pack because they are focusing more on reintegration than on the deployment cycle because many of our military members are coming home. So they're including things like games that the whole family can play. Actually this year they are passing out packets of seeds so that they can plant a garden and then they can, you know, watch that grow together.

They also have Ready, Set, Go trainings, which are, again, trainings for volunteers to educate them on things like the things that we have been discussing, the issues that the kids are going to face when their family member is away, the things that the soldiers are going to face when they come home.

And then they are also encouraging the youth that are staying behind not only to explore the issues of their responsibility in their family, but ways that they can also become entrepreneurs on their own, so they offer babysitting classes.

So these are all programs that we offer through the New York State office here locally, and they're all things that if any of you wanted to make those connections with our organization we could do, you know, for Operation Military Kids on your behalf.

So we have a few upcoming events. I did give you a packet of information and the two flyers in the back, the bright green one is for our Family Fun Day. It's going to be held on June 8th from 10 to 1

p.m. It's just an opportunity for military families to come and have a fun day at the farm. And then over the summer we're offering a summer day camp from July 22nd to July 26th. It will be focused on first through fourth graders. We're asking for a \$25 enrollment fee, but of course if any of the families had any issues with even that amount we would offer a scholarship.

And then, again, I would ask that if you have military families please share these fliers, please share other ideas. We are supporting Legislator Stern's event at the Monster Mini Golf by bringing the family packs and offering up any information that we have. So if you have events similar to that or events that you think that would be good for us to do, we would be happy to do that. We do continue also to offer our services at yellow ribbon events throughout the County, so as they come up we are scheduled to come out and provide that support.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Vicki, thanks so much for being with us and for all the outstanding work that you do with the organization. This is important information for all of us to have so that we can get this information out to military families, to our entire community, throughout all of our districts in Suffolk County, to make sure that everybody is aware of the work that you do and the opportunity to participate in these great events. Thanks for being with us. Legislator Gregory.

LEG. GREGORY:

I just want to say thank you, Vicki. I think this is such an important issue. I think, you know, when deployments are happening we tend to focus on the soldiers that are leaving and maybe the spouses and the children kind of get left behind. I think it's more important in an environment like Suffolk County where you have reservists and guard units. Like when I was stationed in Fort Hood you had more established networks and, you know, and children saw the trucks and you knew that your father or your parent's job was in the military, whereas in a guard situation they may be, you know, they may have -- they have another job and then once a month they go away and all of a sudden dad's going to be away for 18 months and it's like wow. So I think it's important that you have events like this and I really appreciate the work that you do, and so thank you.

MS. FLEMING:

Thank you. That's actually the primary reason why they developed this, was that their next door neighbor wouldn't know why suddenly or their teachers wouldn't know why suddenly there might be behavior issues at school because they wouldn't have known that, you know, the mom or dad was deployed and so that could lead to some behavior issues. And if they're educated on why that's happening and the kids are given coping mechanisms then maybe those things aren't going to happen as frequently. So that's exactly why.

If any of you want more fliers or the PDF for these fliers to distribute more I can certainly -- my e-mail is on the hero pack page. I'm sure a lot of you have my e-mail anyway, but I'd be happy to share those with you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Welcome our friends from Project Hope.

MS. MONTROSE:

Hello. Good afternoon. Obviously you can see from your agenda that it states that Joseph Peragallo would be presenting. I am obviously not Mr. Peragallo. My name is Maureen Montrose and I'm one of the team leaders for Project Hope out of the Clubhouse of Suffolk, and this is my coworker, Erick.

So first of all, I'd just like to thank the Gentile family for your service to our country before we start, because you guys are the reason why we're doing this, and thank you, Chairman Stern and committee members for having us.

So after Hurricane Sandy, FEMA granted funds to some non-profit agencies in Suffolk County to operate this program called Project Hope, and our agency where Erick and I work is the Clubhouse of Suffolk in Ronkonkoma. Each agency that received this funding was granted a specific geographic area to operate in, and our geographic area is the Town of Brookhaven, the Town of Riverhead, but also our population is for all veterans in Suffolk County.

So Project Hope provides individual and group counseling for anyone affected by Hurricane Sandy and specifically for this audience. This applies also to veterans. We provide individual and group counseling. We do educational presentations kind of on a proactive basis about the potential reactions people can have after such a disaster as Super Storm Sandy, and we also help connect people to resources that are hurricane specific for different benefit programs in the County.

We're here to strengthen existing community resource. Project Hope doesn't want to reinvent the wheel. We do a lot of outreach in the community and we educate people on the community resources already in place because Project Hope is a temporary program, so we want to make sure that when this program funding ends people are connected with resources to continue their healing process after Hurricane Sandy.

The Project Hope is free, it is confidential and it is strength based. So we just -- it's not a clinical -- it's not a clinical, therapy based counseling program. It's just more of a neighbor to neighbor. Erick and I are both from Long Island and we're both affected by Hurricane Sandy as well. So it's just kind of like a neighbor to neighbor, let's talk about our experience and how to move forward from that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

How have you been able to identify in particular veterans or their families that require your type of assistance.

MS. MONTROSE:

Well, thus far our outreach efforts, we've began in general in our storm surge category I areas on the Island, but veterans specifically we also, Clubhouse of Suffolk has a strong connection with Suffolk County United Veterans and a lot of our staff are veterans and work for Suffolk County United Veterans like I said, so we've kind of taken the lead from them on different organizations to reach out to in different communities, but another way we're trying to do that is by being here at this meeting and sharing our program with you all.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. So each of us should have information on how veterans in particular but certainly within the geographic area that you are designated to cover know how to reach you, to get in contact with you.

MS. MONTROSE:

Yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Let's make sure that everybody has copies of those.

MS. MONTROSE:

Yes. Thank you, Legislator Stern. We have -- our brochure, our pamphlets that are going to be handed out, our contact information is on the back, and inside is an insert with some of the disaster recovery resources that we use.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

We will make sure to get that out to everybody.

MS. MONTROSE:

Thank you guys so much for this opportunity. We just want to get this information out and we really appreciate the opportunity to use this platform for that purpose.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Great. Thanks so much for being with us and for all that you're doing.

MS. MONTROSE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. Be well. Okay. Anybody else? Anybody else? All right, very good. Then our committee is adjourned. Thank you.

*(*The meeting was adjourned at 2:16 p.m. *)*