

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 29, 2013.

Members Present:

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

Also In Attendance:

Legislator Horsley - Deputy Presiding Officer
George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature
Renee Ortiz - Deputy Clerk of the Legislature
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
Tom Vaughn - County Executive's Office
Honorable John J. Toomey - Presiding Judge, Suffolk County Veterans Court
Rick Brand - Newsday
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken and Transcribed By:

Gabrielle Skolom - Court Stenographer

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

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Good afternoon, everybody, and welcome to the Committee on Veterans and Seniors. Please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Barraga.

*(*Salutation*)*

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

*(*Moment of Silence Observed*)*

Thank you.

Okay. Welcome, everyone, and thank you for joining us. We have a very special guest today. Judge Toomey is with us. Before we go to the judge, we're going to ask Director Ronayne to step up.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, members. This is the holdy microphone. Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, members. Thank you again for the invitation to be here today. I have just a few things to report on. Most of it is probably more housekeeping than anything else. I'm very happy to continue to report that the PTSD Peer-to-Peer Program just continues to evolve in ways that we feel are just very positive, very strong, successes in areas that while we may have anticipated them, I don't know that we anticipated seeing such dynamic results as quickly as we have. We have had, since our last meeting, we have had another callout on a threatened suicide that, over the course of our responding to the residents, turned into an actual overdose, and we have another save that we can credit to this program, and these are just the cases where the successes, we always knew that they would be gratifying and fulfilling, but to know that we're actually experiencing legitimate saves, we've got veterans who woke up this morning because of this program. These are funerals that we didn't have to attend, and I don't think there's a greater testament to the success of the program than a life saved.

We had reported at our last committee that the State has agreed to continue to fund the program. They have expanded the program from four counties and \$800,000. It is now 11 counties and the funding is at 2.3 million. One of the counties who is going to be in receipt of funds to establish their own program is Nassau County. I was very happy to have been invited to join in the formal announcement in Nassau County last week, and we have had several discussions both with Nassau County and with the Mental Health Association, who is going to be the contractor administering the program for Nassau County, and we've discussed several areas where their program will have the benefit of being able to examine our program and benefit from our lessons learned, experiences that we've already gone through, and allow them to develop a stronger program from the outset rather than some of the trials that we had to go through. We certainly don't expect that they will adopt our program in its entirety, but we think it'd certainly be beneficial for them to incorporate certain elements of our program.

Probably the most exciting aspect of having the program expand into Nassau County is -- there are certain components of the programs, and we've already had these discussions, where it makes absolute sense for us to share resources and share certain services. In regard to training, for example, many of the trainings that we use for our program staff are done at cost to the program. If we can consolidate Nassau program and Suffolk program and work with these programs together in attending trainings, attending certification programs and so forth, we cut the costs of those trainings in half. Those are dollars that can be applied to other areas of the programs where we can

certainly, ideally better use them. So, again, we're very excited that the program has been expanded.

We are -- again, we have eight groups at this time that are meeting on a weekly basis. We have -- the number fluctuates pretty widely depending on any number of factors, but anywhere from 75 to 100 veterans per week depending on whether transportation issues, any number of factors that contribute to the attendance, but the meetings are being well-attended. We actually met last week with a group who provides at no cost canine companion animals for veterans with TBIs and PTSD. They have agreed to consider working us. I think the question is more a matter of whether we'll be convinced that we want to work with them. At this point, it looks we're very interested in learning more about their program, but that would provide us another level of opportunity to serve these veterans in where we would be able to pair some of these veterans with companion animals, and those programs have proven to be very beneficial. They are very therapeutic and very beneficial to the mental health and the development and the recovery of the veterans experiencing the PTSD, so we look forward to that. That's just one example of the source of things that we're working with.

I know Legislator Stern knows the folks from New Beginnings. I've mentioned New Beginnings a couple times in the past. They have also offered, under their medical directors, supervision to allow us on a case-by-case basis to have veterans in our program who suffer from PTSD to be evaluated and consider experimenting -- not experimenting -- undergoing the hyperbaric oxygen treatment that they have at their Medford facility. They now have four chambers for HBO therapy. They have offered -- the course of treatment typically is 40 sessions of being under the HBO treatment. They have offered to do eight veterans, 40 treatments per veteran at no cost to the County, the program or to the veteran. They have got some medical-based evidence to support the successes. We would not be contracting with them. We would not be endorsing them. This would be an individual decision made on the part of each veteran as to whether or not they wanted to become a part of that program, but it sounds encouraging and certainly worthy of further explanation, so we are excited about that as well.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All good.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I would like to say that I had not only the good fortune to spend part of yesterday with the Chairman but also his two sons. We had -- in Deer Park at the Monster Mini Golf Center, we very graciously had the facility donated by the owners for use as a part of the month of the military child. They opened it up to parent and children of our local service members and National Guardsmen and so forth. It was a nice day. 4H from the Cornell Cooperative was out, had beautiful backpack gifts made for the children. Just really a nice, nice event. I can't say enough. These are the sorts of things that really speak to the commitment of our community, when we have had businessowners who are willing to do things like put a sign on their door and tell their normal patrons that the business is closed for a private program and to serve the children, the Month of the Military Child. I just thought it was very nice of them to do so, and we're very grateful for the fact that they did.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

I just wanted to thank you for coming to our Rocky Point, actually with District 6, community forum. I know it was held in the VFW hall in Rocky Point, and it was so nice seeing you and I think your kids, your two kids, right?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

My niece and my nephew were there as well.

LEG. ANKER:

Niece and nephew. Again, the community appreciates your support and your outreach and then coming to us and letting us know what's going on, but it was nice to see all the people in the room and trying to resolve some of the problems. You know, it's going to be ongoing, but if we can get the most information possible from different perspectives, I think we can definitely make our communities better, so thank you for attending that.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And thank you for helping to sponsor that. I know the VFW had allowed the use of their hall in Rocky Point, but Legislator Anker and County Executive Bellone held a town hall meeting. Those are terrific. Just another example of the community taking part in the larger process. I guess there were roughly 100 people in the room, and it certainly allowed an opportunity for the folks in the community to have their voices heard, to speak directly with the officials, get responses. Not all of the responses were what they wanted to hear, but there was an honest dialogue, and I think that's important.

The fact that the VFW continues to donate that building and many others throughout the County also speaks to their level of commitment to the community, and I'll just give Legislator Anker a little plug here. I knew that I was going to be in Rocky Point for this event, so I made arrangements to go out a little bit earlier and take my niece and nephew out to dinner. They live in Rocky Point, and over our supper, my niece, who is a junior in high school, began to talk about her civics class, and without any prompting from me -- I don't know that I had even shared with them that I was going to this event at that point -- and my niece began to talk to me about her civics class and went on to explain to me that they had just had a test and asked me if I knew anything about Legislator Anker or County Executive Bellone because they had both been on a recent test at Rocky Point High School.

LEG. ANKER:

I hope it was good.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Fortunately, in light of everything we have seen lately with school testing, I will not be requesting a copy of the test.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I'm sure that the Legislator Anker answer was worth double credit.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I have no doubt.

LEG. ANKER:

I hope so.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Horsley.

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

Yes. Hi. How are you, Commissioner?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good afternoon.

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

I just wanted to -- I wasn't sure if you had spoken to it. I was a little late. Resolution 1301, Conducting a study to determine the feasibility of establishing Community Emergency Support

Centers at veterans support organization sites in Suffolk County. It sounds like the perfect segue into the Rocky Point VFW and others that have opened their doors to the community. Particularly in my area, they are dealing with the Sandy Storm, and I just thought you might want to comment about it so you know what we're thinking about.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, as we said --

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

Did you speak to this before, and I just missed it?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

No, no. We were waiting for you.

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

I'm sure.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The fact that these posts, these VFWs, American Legions exist in most of our communities for, I think with very, very few exceptions, they have all demonstrated over the years to be very willing to extend themselves and allow their resources to be available to the community, and town hall meetings, little league registrations, all of those things are examples of that. But a conversation that Legislator Horsley and I had had, as well as with Commissioner Williams of FRES, we went back and took a look at some of the things that occurred during and immediately after Hurricane Sandy, and obviously there were many, many things takings place in our communities. But one of the things that stood out, at least in my opinion, and I thank Legislator Horsley for recognizing this, was that many of these halls, the VFW, the American Legions, the Marine Corps. leagues, without any formal contact having been made, without any requests, without any compensation, without any of the things that so many people would expect to be part of the norm today, they spontaneously evolved into community centers of different types. They provided the ability for folks with no power, if the halls had power, that they could go in and be in either an air-conditioned space or a heated space. They were kitchens and while they were not preparing meals or operating as kitchens or soup kitchens or pantries, they did have the ability, heating baby formula, heating meals for children, heating meals for elderly, providing ice. Most of these buildings have at least one or two significant-sized ice machines. Ice when there is no power is suddenly a real commodity. The other opportunity that these buildings allowed the community were charging cell phones, little things like that when we had no power and no communications.

One of the other benefits that I see to this in allowing these programs to be more refined and to be more highly developed so that in a time of emergency, whether it's a natural emergency -- it may be a hurricane or a blizzard. It could be a blackout, it could be a local, a very localized event, any number of reasons why these buildings might come into use -- if we were to formalize this and prepare so that when emergencies did occur, that these buildings and their staff, their teams would be in a position to respond immediately and get up and running. One of the areas that we've talked about, I think a very good example would be after the storm, with all of the evacuations that took place. We very, very quickly ran out of available hotel and motel rooms. About the time we ran out of hotel and motel rooms, we had many, many crews coming in from out of New York State or out of the area with no place to stay. We had no place to house these utility crews. Certainly, I don't know that we're -- I don't think that we're suggesting that these buildings become shelters or sheltering operations, but when we've got utility men from Ohio and Pennsylvania and Virginia sleeping in their trucks after working 20-hour days, I think the availability of these buildings to place cots and have someplace where these utility workers can go and safely -- safely rest is another place where they would provide tremendous value.

An ancillary benefit to that is for every utility crew that we don't have a to find a hotel or motel room for is another Suffolk County resident, another Suffolk County taxpayer that in that time of need, we would be able to use that resource for them. So I think the opportunities are probably too many to count in regard to how these properties can help us in a time of need.

I don't want to confuse the two issues, but another thing that maybe we should bear in mind is a number of years ago, we had a very heavy emphasis on the CERT training in Suffolk County, and we've trained several hundred veterans to be CERT responders. This is where these guys come from, these buildings, so we've got, in many of them, we've actually got trained personnel with the resources and the facilities available to aid the community. And, again, aside from being the civic-minded, civic-spirited, community-based assistance that we would like to see, this can all be done at no cost to the County.

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

Thank you very much, Commissioner, and you did a great job of summarizing all the conversations I think we've had over the last six months into your one presentation. And in a micro-level, just what happened in my community, this is in Babylon Village Post '94, literally became the center for hurricane relief for my community. It wasn't all that it was just the veterans that help out, but they organized volunteers called "Babylon Helps," which centered themselves in the American Legion hall, and if the American Legion Hall wasn't there, they wouldn't have been able to provide the services that they came to rely on, particularly in those first couple weeks after the storm when people were just scrambling, didn't know, you know, what they were going to do the next day and where they were going to sleep and stuff like that, and it just became the place to be for Babylon Village, and I'm sure that would happen anywhere across Suffolk County.

So I think this is a very important bill and oftentimes, like in Babylon Town, the shelter, the shelter for -- rescue shelter is in Deer Park, which is not really accessible to along the South Shore, so having these more localized emergency centers could be a very positive thing, and the veterans want to do it. They asked me to put this in, and I think that is -- goes to their nature, that they are community activists, and they are involved with the community. I'm not sure that we're not going to hear some of the things that they're going to want because of that; that's another issue we'll deal with at a later date. But I think this is -- it's good for the communities, and I think it's good for the vets.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I thank you, and I agree. It's more than just a willingness to be a part of this; they are anxious to do so.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Anybody else for the Director? All right. Tom, maybe you can hang there for just a few moments, because I'm sure you're going to want to be a part of the discussion, and then we're going to go to the agenda with items and then come back to you in a moment.

But for right now, it really is a pleasure to welcome our special guest today, the Honorable John J. Toomey, presiding judge of the Suffolk County Veterans Court. I remember a couple years ago, I had the honor of joining the judge and so many leaders in our community to open the Veterans Court, and then we heard from the Judge shortly thereafter about his vision for the operation of this important initiative, so it really is a pleasure to welcome the Judge back to talk about all the great work that he and his team have been doing to restore veterans in our community. So, Judge, welcome.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Thank you very much, Chairman, and thank you very much for having me here this afternoon. I just want to take a few moments to talk about the Veterans Court. As you know, when veterans came back from Afghanistan and Iraq, most of them integrated into the community very well, but

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there was a sense that some of them were having problems with certain maladies which I'll get to in a few moments, but I must say that the elected officials, our political leaders in Suffolk, were in the forefront of identifying these problems and instituted the Suffolk County Veterans Court in February of 2011. When the Veterans Court first began here in Suffolk County, it was one of the few in the United States and only the second one in New York State. When discussions for the Veterans Court first began, the administrative judge in Suffolk County approached me and asked me if I would like to be the presiding justice of the soon-to-be formed court. Being a Vietnam Veteran, I readily accepted the assignment. Quite frankly, it was an immense honor for myself and a privilege for me to preside over that court.

Many of our returning veterans are coming home with post-traumatic stress syndrome and traumatic brain injury. These maladies may cause depression in veterans and lead to alcohol abuse, substance abuse, mental illnesses, unemployment, and then strained personal relationships. With the increase of veterans of serious needs, in our criminal justice system comes a need for that system to develop innovative ways of working with these returning veterans.

The Veterans Court is a specialized part of both the Suffolk County Courts and the Suffolk County District Court. This court provides the means to successfully help veterans by diverting them from a traditional criminal justice system and providing them with the tools that they will use to lead a productive and law-abiding life. Through treatment, rehabilitative programming, reenforcement, and judicial monitoring, successful completion of the program will result in a reduction of charges and, in most cases, a vast reduction in sentencing.

What is unique to the Veterans Court and what separates it from other courts is that it's, I would say, very-loosely structured. I don't wear a robe in the District Court, mostly because I'm coming from Riverhead. But it's a situation where sometimes I think to my detriment if we get to know all of the veterans, we get to know all the defendants, and they all participate in this judicially supervised treatment plan. Not only myself, we also have a court staff. We have veteran healthcare professionals from the Northport VA, veteran peer mentors. We also use alcohol and drug professionals.

Presently, we have approximately 50 veterans involved in the program. Unfortunately, the program is growing and we seem to be adding six or seven veterans each month. Recently, we had our first graduation where nine of our veterans successfully completed the program. These veterans took full advantage of this opportunity and have completely turned their lives around. Nothing gives us greater privilege and pleasure than to see these veterans who, in the throes sometimes of drug abuse or alcoholism, actually get in the program, work that program, and turn their lives around and become productive members of society again. By no means is the Veterans Court a free pass. If the veteran fails to complete the program, we will impose a jail or a prison sentence on that defendant. What is different about the Veterans Court, and I think what separates this court from other treatment courts, is that in the Veterans Court, we do have a mentoring program. If you visit my court when it is in session, the Veterans Court, you will find it to be quite crowded and active. On one side of the courtroom, you will see several men, most of them about my age, wearing green jackets. These men are the backbone of the court and they serve as mentors to aid the veteran defendants while they are going through the court process. Most, if not all of these mentors, are Vietnam Veterans who remember all too well when returning veterans were not always held in the high regard that they are today. Their creed is to never leave a fellow veteran behind, and they practice what they preach and go to extreme lengths to ensure that every veteran knows that there are guys just like themselves in their corner and they assist these veterans in only a way another veteran can.

I must state before getting involved with the Veterans Court, though I am a veteran myself, I had absolutely no experience whatsoever with the Veteran Administration. I knew nothing about it. However, over the last year and a half, last two and a half years, I've developed a great respect for the Veterans Administration, and I'm truly impressed on how it goes the extra mile to try to help our

veterans. I know how hard these people work and I have to say it was a revelation to me how they actually try to get these guys back on the right track and get their lives back. I can tell you as I sit here today, I've been a judge for a little bit over 10 years, and before that, I practiced law for 25 years, and I can tell you that nothing in my professional life has given me more of a feeling of satisfaction than presiding over this court. For myself, I find it to be a great privilege, and it's something I immensely enjoy. Helping these people get their lives who have given so much for us is something that I find to be a great privilege.

I have to say that two of the people that were instrumental in starting the Veterans Court, one is Steven Stern, who has worked, I know, very hard in it, Congressman Israel; and, Mr. Stern, I thank you very much for it, and, I have to tell you, this is the first time I think I actually had to speak after Tom Ronayne. Usually I get the privilege of going before him, and it's intimidating sometimes to speak after Tom. Tom, not only is he big in stature but he always has great ideas, and he's somebody that really follows through, and I think you have a great guy, and I've worked very closely with Tom, and I know he's somebody who certainly has not only the County -- everything right for the County but he really has the veterans true, you know, feelings in his heart, and he's definitely there 24/7 for them. Believe me, it's my privilege just to be able to talk about the Veterans Court here this afternoon, and if any of you people have any questions, I'd be glad to try to answer them for you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And I do, and thank you, Judge, for your comments and for being us and for your tremendous leadership, and I'm sure my colleagues would agree that having the both of you here today is not only special for us but continues to send an important message because through both of your efforts, you not only provide much-needed leadership here locally, but both of you in your individual capacities literally serve as models, as examples, for the rest of the State and I believe for the rest of the nation. So thank you for all that you do, Judge.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I did have a couple questions. First of all, Judge, could you maybe take us through a typical example, the type of person you see before your court and then maybe the typical type of a program that they need in order to be successful coming out of your court.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

What the nuts and bolts of it is, first of all, we have to identify the defendant to be a veteran. He does that with his DD214. If he's actually an honorable discharged veteran, he's eligible for veterans benefits. He's then eligible to come into the court. The gatekeeper for the court is the District Attorney's Office. His attorney would have to get together with the district attorney and come to a resolution, and part of the resolution would be this individual then coming into Veterans Court. I have to tell you, Tom Spota has been very instrumental in allowing and has been fairly liberal in allowing people to come into the court. At first, they didn't want people coming in that have five-mile intoxicated offenses because, I think, naturally, they are afraid it could blow up on them. But lately they have actually -- we're seeing a lot of people come in with five-mile long intoxicated offenses, we see a lot of people come in with weapons offenses, some domestic violence, possession, sometimes sale of controlled substances. We've had people facing four or five years in State prison and they do come in.

To come in, there's usually two things that they have. They usually have post-traumatic stress syndrome, or in some cases, they have traumatic brain injuries. They said they manifest themselves in the abuse of alcohol and drugs. So when they come in, they may have a drug problem, they may have an alcohol problem, and it's almost an education for me because we find out that they really can't treat the alcohol or the drugs -- the drug problem until they deal with the

PTSD or the traumatic brain injury. So we have a coordinator who works with the VA. He's an excellent guy. His name is Eric Bruno. He sets up the treatment for them. Most of it is done through the VA. They have the counselors there, both for alcohol and narcotics. They treat post-traumatic stress injury, and they also treat the traumatic brain injury. If they can't do it in Northport, they'll even send them to other places. They'll send them upstate to a place called Montrose. They send them into New York -- into St. Albans, and almost they can use every VA in the country.

We have a lot of guys that come back and they just started, something that Tom was talking about, a post-traumatic stress syndrome wing in the VA where these guys are going in there for 30 days, getting treatment, coming out, and they find that they can best treat them for alcohol and drugs after they have dealt with their other issues. As you can imagine, this place was sending people back and forth from Iran to Afghanistan and combat, especially infantry combat can be immensely stressful on anybody. And then they come back here and all of a sudden everything is right, and they're still 12,500 miles away in the desert, so it's a big adjustment for them. Most of them do not get in trouble, about 98 percent of them don't, but some of them, I think they come back and it's not as easy to fit in. I always found myself it's a lot easier to adjust to military life than it is for civilian life. In the military life, they are yelling at you, you're there. When you come back, you have all these freedoms that you never had before and some people do, once in a while, their freedoms will intersect with the criminal justice system, and what we try to do is get them back on track. They're mostly men with a lot of pride, and we try to give them back their life and, you know, we've been somewhat -- you know, I would say not 100 percent, nothing is 100 percent, but very successful, and these people when they come back are very appreciative of it, and it really, you know, makes me feel well. And I always tell them, I'm not really anything to do with it. We just give them the opportunity to help themselves, and, like I said, almost all of them really take that opportunity, so it's extremely gratifying work for me. As a Judge, they can actually see you make an impact on people's lives and somewhat turning them around, but I'm just, like, overseeing it; they're actually doing it. I hope that wasn't too long an answer.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

Again, thank you for coming out here. I have heard so many wonderful comments about your program. I'm glad that you're here to explain it and to give us some insight. I'm just curious, have you had studies as far as statistics done on the program that you're working on right now?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

That's a very good question. It started in February 2011. We just had our first graduates a couple of months ago. It's really in its infancy. I can tell you that mine that went through haven't come back, so I guess it's 100 percent. But I think it would be years before you could really judge whether or not -- you know, I feel at this stage it's definitely an impact, we're definitely exposing these people to the fact that there is help out there, that they do have problems, that there's a resolution to these problems. But I think the statistics will show in the future that it was a -- that it is a successful program, but in all honestly, it's much too early to say what those statistics will show.

LEG. ANKER:

And also, is the format of the program able to be used for other municipalities or other locations?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Yeah. I didn't mean to cut you off. After we went up in February of 2011, right after Brooklyn started one, Nassau started one, Erie County in Upstate New York was -- I think it might have been the first one in the country. It certainly was the first one in New York State, and we were right after it. It's modeled somewhat after -- I don't know if you're familiar with the Drug Court. It's another treatment part, but nonveterans would be in the Drug Court. But makes us a little bit different and

gives us, kind of, a head start on them because we do have the Veterans Administration so insurance for treatment is never a problem. If they need housing, the VA has housing, they have job counselling, transportation to and from court, to and from the programs. The VA actually does a lot of work. I know over the years, even in my own lifetime, I've been somewhat maligned, but, I mean, what they give these veterans, every chance to succeed. I mean, everything is done for them. You could do the Veterans Court in other municipalities, but it would be hard to take the model that we have for the Veterans Court and apply it to other, you know, nonveterans because you don't have the resources, I guess, of the Veterans Administration, if that answers your question.

LEG. ANKER:

Absolutely. Now, is this spreading throughout the country or have you -- is this mainly --

JUDGE TOOMEY:

It definitely is spreading throughout the country, and I know in New York State, I would say, it seems like I hear about it or I get a call from another jurisdiction that's doing it. Actually, they're just starting and Judge Heinrichs, my supervisor, he's in charge of all the courts in Suffolk County. He's been very helpful in this. They're actually starting a satellite court on the East End, which'll be from Riverhead or Brookhaven East. I don't know when they'll be starting but hopefully will be the next couple weeks.

LEG. ANKER:

I thank you for this intervention. I think it's vital that we show that we're supporting our military. Unfortunately, there are situations like the multiple deployment and some of the other issues. You know, we want our future generations to be proud to enter into the military, and we need to make sure that we're doing everything we can. And unfortunately what happens, I guess, with military service is that you're exposed to so much psychological situations and, you know, and having to use the guns and violence and things like that, those experiences, there needs be more support with their men and women coming back, and this, you know, what your program is providing is that support, so again, thank you.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

It has to be extremely difficult for these guys to go there for nine months, come back for six, and go back. I mean, I don't know how they do it. They got to be -- it has to be, especially on their family life, I mean, I think we're asking them to do a very difficult thing. It's one thing doing it once; doing it two, three, sometimes I've talked to people who've been there four times. It's unbelievable sacrifice.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

What a great element of the program to hear about the Vietnam Veterans actively participating in the courts, and, as we've discussed around here so many times, the best approach, of course, is veterans receiving assistance from fellow veterans, so our Vietnam veterans certainly know and are able to participate in that meaningful of a way within your court is really great to see.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

It's really, it's heartfelt. They have the time, and I can't say enough about them. I mean, it makes me proud to be one of them, not for what I do, for what they do. And it's all without any -- I tell them, "The State pays me a lot of money to do it; you guys are doing this for nothing." I mean, they go out to the jail and talk to them. It's unbelievable what they do. I'm sure Tom can testify to it to. It's just unbelievable, the good will out there for our veterans, and, you know, on many fronts, and I think, like I said, the Veterans Court is probably just a small part of it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Gregory.

LEG. GREGORY:

Thank you, Mr. Chair, and thank you, Judge, for coming here today and talking about the wonderful work that you do at the Veterans Court. I have been to the Drug Court, and I've been to the graduations, and you said that the Veterans Court is similarly structured. Now, is the program that you referred to, is it an 18-month program generally? I know that's not set -- I know the Drug Court, that's not set in stone. Some are graduated I guess in 12 months, 18 months depending on their particular individual case, but, you know, it's an 18-month, generally, program, structured program?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

What we do in the Veterans Court, if it's a misdemeanor coming in, it's 12 months.

LEG. GREGORY:

Okay.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

If it's a felony, it's 18 month, so that's how we would differentiate, but it's a good question; some are in for 12, some are in for 18. A lot of times, too -- I hate to use this cliché -- a lot of times, part of rehabilitation is relapse, and from time to time, we'll have a veteran that will relapse. If that's the case, we'll extend that period another 60 or 90 days. So they sign up for 12 months or 18 depending on the seriousness of what their charge is, and it could be a situation where we would extend it. You know, we're, I think, fairly liberal on how we extend it. We try to give them every chance to succeed, and, you know, but usually they'll be out in 18 months.

LEG. GREGORY:

And do you find that treating the PTSD first has been very successful? My understanding is that -- you know, that that's not something in all cases or in most instances that could necessarily be treated in the short-term, but at least if you get people, I guess, giving the right treatment, it sets the conditions for the ailments, if you will, to be addressed.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

I'm not anything into psychology or anything like that. It's been explained to me -- I mean, I know from my own experience of working with them, but it's explained to me, if you have somebody who has an alcohol problem or whose alcohol is made worse by a situation, that he went through a stressful situation. In our case, in the case we're dealing with, it's combat. If you don't treat the PTSD, it's almost impossible to treat the alcoholism so that they treat them both at the same time. Probably PTSD would be -- I don't know what the timeframe is for it. I think it's something that they go on for years and years, but I think a lot of it is the realization of what you went through, that the feelings that you have, there's nothing wrong with how you feel, numerous other people, high percentage of people have felt the same way, so it's the feeling of that individual possibly accepting it and realizing what's wrong with his personal relationships, why he's drinking, why he's doing drugs, why he's, you know, acting up in home and stuff like that, and I think once they are made to realize that, they can start to attack their other problems. A lot of times, there might be somebody dealing with alcoholism and they find out -- and I think that as they go through this, they're finding out, really, that the alcohol is a problem but the PTSD is manifesting itself as alcoholism, so they're treating them both at the same time. One guy we sent to St. Albans for PTSD, he was really -- I'm very proud of him. He just graduated. He actually just finished the program. He'll be graduating in the next class. But he did everything he could do, dealt with his PTSD successfully. He had a very bad drug problem, and at this point, he's been clean for about, I would say, 19 months, so he's doing very well. So I think first and foremost was treating his underlying problems before he was dealing with his heroin problem.

LEG. GREGORY:

Right. Great and I think that's --

JUDGE TOOMEY:

If I'm right, and believe me, I'm just talking to you from my experiences, not from any background in that.

LEG. GREGORY:

Yeah, I don't think any of us are professionals here; psychologists, anyway. But we've talked about it before in committee, the Director, and it's been a big concern expressed that people with PTSD not even coming forward. So it's great that those that are coming through the program, they are being identified as having PTSD, and they are getting the treatment they need, that so many people are not getting that treatment and addressing the other issues, associated issues. I think that's wonderful, so, again, thank you for your work, and will you be having -- like the Drug Court, they have --

JUDGE TOOMEY:

We have a big graduation. It was in -- I'll give you the date. I'll get that to Tom. I hate to say this -- it's in June -- but I don't have it off the top of my head.

LEG. GREGORY:

Okay. Great. Thank you, sir.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Mr. Stern, were you at the last graduation? We invited you, but you weren't there.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Barraga.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Thank you, Judge, for being with us this afternoon. Let me ask you a quick question. Let's go back to the example you used about the soldier at St. Albans, and he's going to graduate, he's finishing the program. What procedures are in place for follow up?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

That's a very good question, Tom. What we have, as far as the court, once they are disposed of, the guy is finally sentenced, my jurisdiction ends. The case is over. It would be like that with any other case. But what we do is we introduce them to the benefits of the Veterans Administration, so a lot of these guys will stay, and I know from past experience, that these guys still go for their treatment at the VA, they maybe have established some type of rapport with their mentors or with other veterans, and they keep going. But now they're exposed to the rehabilitation, that there is a way that you can continue to keep your life on track by continuing your program, continuing rehabilitation, trying to be on guard with what can happen. We talk to them about that and express it to them; you might be out of here, you don't have to worry about me sending you to jail or something, but you still have the rest of your life, the rest of your family, and yourself to be responsible for. But once I sentence them, once they finish their 12 or 18 months, at that point, I don't have jurisdiction over them, and hopefully I'll never get it back. But most of them at that point, hopefully we've given them the tools where they can go out and lead a successful, normal life.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Is there anything that prevents them from, at that point, once they graduated, if they are back in society from joining the Peer-to-Peer group?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Sure, I think they do that a lot. We have guys that come back and actually become mentors and talk to other veterans. They do get involved in veterans groups, and hopefully they do keep their treatment with the Veterans Administration.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Yeah, but the group that Tom was talking about, you know, there's eight different groups now. They're all individuals suffering from PTSD and whatnot. Is there anyone that prevents someone that the judges handle from joining your group?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

On the contrary, we encourage it. The mentors the Judge keeps referring to, the green jackets, many of them, almost all of them are Vietnam Veterans themselves, and they work also very closely with my office on a number of a programs. They've been extremely supportive in terms of advising the mentees in the program in the court to take advantage of the services available through our office, and by extension of that for us to have the ability to expose them to the peer program. Once they leave the court, for them to think that it's a clean break and there's no need to continue doing all the good things and the positive things that have come out of their interaction with the court I think would be unfortunate.

LEG. BARRAGA:

My experience over the years is that these people need continuous, if not monitoring, but they need assistance and help, and as long as your organization is available and that's one of the ones suggested and recommended, I think it's sort of a natural fit.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And many people have been comparing our Peer-to-Peer Program and in many ways, I agree. It's been compared to the 12-step programs. The anonymity, the peer-type support, the facilitator or sponsor-type relationships, so again, we think it's --

LEG. BARRAGA:

I'm glad that Peer-to-Peer is doing so well because, as you know, when it first came up, I had reservations because over the years it's been very difficult to get soldiers and Marines who are suffering with PTSD to come forward and seek help and assistance, but obviously maybe times are better.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

It seems like it's changing, you know, quite a bit and, like I said, like the mentor program, I would say it's the backbone of the court. I mean, they have -- one of the guys a couple weeks ago had a problem, he called a mentor, the mentor got involved with VA, and he's still in the program. The example that you raised is somebody leaving the program, but everybody gets a mentor, and we assign a mentor to every individual defendant. And for the most part they have a relationship, and they talk to them, they can call them, and, in my opinion, I think it's significant. You know, and once the guy graduates from the court, we haven't had many graduates. We've only had seven. It is, like I said, in its infancy. I mean, that relationship will hopefully still stand, and, like I said, some of the guys come back or want to come back and become mentors, and it's really good. What we're trying to do is encourage, actually, the soldier that went to St. Albans to come back because he's relatively young -- he's not even 30 years old yet -- to mentor some of the younger ones. And, hopefully, it will be successful. Like I said to Legislator Anker, you know, the future will tell, but I'm optimistic that we are turning people around and we're putting them in a situation. Part of it is just giving them the tools that they can help themselves and hopefully that will continue into the future.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Great. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Horsley.

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

Yes, thank you, Mr. Chair. Your Honor, I think this is -- I love the fact that you just beam, when you start talking about this. I can tell you're -- this is very important for you, and I appreciate that.

I just wanted to, since there are so many folks that are coming back with traumatic brain injury, does that fit into this court as well? I mean, it seems to me that that is as much physiological as it is psychological. Do they -- do you find that there are cases that, you know, if someone is traumatically brain injured that they fit into this category as well as PTSD?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Oh, absolutely. I think the two things would be traumatic brain injury and PTSD what really are causing a lot of the problems with the people coming back. You can get blown up on these IEDs, you can be in a armored or outside a car, and though you may not suffer any physical injury, no broken bones, no lacerations or anything, but it's almost like a football player --

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

Right. Yeah.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

-- getting hit, and though he's groggy, he's okay. There's no outward manifestation of an injury. It's all inside. Traumatic brain injury is huge and getting those people to think again. I believe, and, like I said, I'm not a professional --

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

But you could do that on a psychological basis, Peer-to-Peer?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

We do that. I don't do it. No, not that. That would be done by professionals on traumatic brain injury, and I think they do it at St. Albans, and I think that they do do it at a place called Montrose and at Northport, but that is something that's much more difficult to treat it, I believe, than the PTSD.

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

Yeah, that's what I was wondering, how did that work.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

We definitely have TBI defendants in the court and are treating them.

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

Do you find that TBI actually could lead you to nonconstructive things, like getting themselves arrested and stuff like that?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Sure. It's something that just completely clouds your judgment, and, you know, like I said, not all of them but that is something -- TBI will put you, you know, in that crossroads with the criminal justice system. It's a lack of -- I guess for a better word, it's kind of like a lack of judgement. It's like a severe concussion, and, again, if you have problems with any alcohol or drugs, it's going to be, you know, exasperated by that.

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

Thank you. I appreciate that because I don't think I understand that as much.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

If I could just add to that a moment, early on in these wars -- and, again, fortunately, we have learned from past experiences, previous wars and conflicts. Earlier on in these wars, we actually had a period of time where VA, and for all of the good work that they do and for all of the skill and expertise that they have, PTSD and certain TBIs clinically present very similarly. Behaviorally there

are a lot of common characteristics between the two.

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

Yes. I'm not sure everyone knows that.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yeah. And so much so, that early on in these wars, before we got as good at it as we are now, we still have a ways to go. There were actually instances of TBIs being misdiagnosed as PTSD, which was tragic because they present similarly clinically, but the course of treatment is dramatically different; you know, that's where the departure occurs. So, yeah, I mean, to find veterans with TBIs and not PTSD encountering the criminal justice system is not at all uncommon.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Just one quick note. I could tell you through 2005 you rarely in the military heard the letters "PTSD." It was mainly traumatic brain injury, and you physically had to see it. You know, this idea of being in a tank and all of a sudden, it's an explosion and there's the jarring of the brain but there's no physical damage, that wasn't even taken into consideration in terms of TBI. It was physically you had to see it, and TBI, it's extremely difficult to treat because of the physical damage to the brain, the question of anxiety, frustration, depression, all the different elements, and pain and suffering that these people go through. The TBI, in my judgement, it's much more challenging than the PTSD.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Absolutely. I think every professional will agree with that, and PTSD always -- from World War I was shell-shocked and thousand yard stab, but the traumatic brain injury is actually an organic problem, that the brain is rattled. It's not as much a psychological disease or defect.

Thank you very much for your questions.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Judge, thank you very much for being with us today, and, of course, we wish you continued success.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Mr. Chairman, one more thing I would like to say about the court. We've been talking about the morally-correct thing to do and the ethically-appropriate thing to do by having a court like Judge Toomey's court and the ability to provide a level of service that had previously not been available to these veterans who so deserve it. If I can take the good-guy hat off for a moment and I put the practical hat on for a moment, every veteran who comes before the Judge's court would have potentially been incarcerated, hospitalized, or in some other way at the financial responsibility of the County. Every veteran who comes before the Judge's court, those resources are diverted to the Federal dime, and all of those costs, the incarceration costs are not incurred typically because the Judge is not locking these guys up. He's putting them in programs as opposed to a jail, so we're not paying to have these veterans incarcerated, we're not guarding them, we're not feeding them, we're not caring for them. Their healthcare needs are being addressed by VA. They're not being absorbed by Suffolk County, through the Sheriff's Department or through DSS or the health centers or anything else. So in addition to the moral, the ethical, and just the right thing to do, the elements of this program, I don't know how to calculate it, but I would suggest the cost savings to the County through this court are quite significant as well.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Absolutely, and not just what we're doing but how the Judge and his staff is doing it as well continue to be a leader throughout the State, as we said before, and indeed throughout the nation. Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And it wasn't mentioned earlier but the Judge described himself as a Vietnam veteran. I think in all of his humility, I'll say it for him, the Judge is a highly decorated Vietnam veteran. He is a combat-wounded, ground-pounder, real-deal, extraordinary military service, and I just want to thank him publicly for his service and for his contribution to all that we have. He won't speak of it for himself, but I sometimes feel it's necessary to just make people aware of the fact that he has a pretty extraordinary background.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

But I was only 19 at the time. Thank you very much.

(Applause)

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you, Judge.

Okay. We have a couple of items before us today.

IR 1301, Conducting a study to determine the feasibility of establishing Community Emergency Support Centers at veterans support organization sites in Suffolk County (Horsley). Legislator Horsley, to you.

D.P.O. HORSLEY:

I'm not on the committee, but I'll be glad to make the motion.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. So I'll make that motion. Motion to approve. Second by Legislator Barraga. We've discussed it previously. Anybody else have any discussion on it? Everybody's good? All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? IR 1301 is approved. **Approved (5-0-0-0)**

IR 1366, Authorizing the County Executive to execute an Intermunicipal Agreement with the Town of Brookhaven and accepting funds associated with the cost of part-time assignment of a Veterans Services Officer to the Town (County Executive). To get it before us, I'll make a motion to approve. Second by Legislator Anker. Anybody on the motion? Maybe, Director, to you; what do you think?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

This is an example of smart government. This is how we should be approaching things. We've got a service that is being -- that the Town is attempting to deliver but with regard to the limitations that they have before them, they can deliver only a limited service. We have the ability to provide a much, much higher level of service and provide a greater degree of satisfactory result to our veterans who are being served. To have the Town and the County share these services and share these resources and share the expenses related to them is just smart government at its best, in my opinion. I did speak this morning with both Supervisor Romaine and County Executive Bellone. This is just a win all the way around, not only for the County and for the Town, but certainly for the veterans who reside in the Town of Brookhaven and who will benefit from the ability to access these enhanced services.

LEG. ANKER:

Are they going to keep the people there within their vets services at the Town of Brookhaven and add additional personal from the County?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I don't know what Brookhaven is doing with regard to their personnel. We will be assigning a, on a part-time basis, a Suffolk County Veterans Service Officer to work in an office that Town of

Brookhaven is providing for us at town hall.

LEG. ANKER:

I have a huge veteran population, and I know the Town has the senior center in Mount Sinai. They have the vets chat forum, which is really -- it's great. But the County has so much to offer and to have another venue to have that, a place to go and to share contacts, it will just help all of us when -- you know, in trying to help our vets so thanks.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I agree, and you've heard me speak often of the fact that our veteran service officers, myself included, are accredited by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. That credential, that accreditation is key to really just elevating the level of service that we can deliver, and when we prosecute a case as an accredited veterans service officer, we have far more ability to influence that case, to maintain contact with that case as it travels through the VA system, and to keep the veteran informed of its progress. Without this accreditation, those abilities do not exist. The documents are submitted and you don't know anything about it until a decision is made one way or the other, either in favor of or in denial of. We have much more ability to provide a favorable outcome.

LEG. ANKER:

It's just another -- I don't know -- another weave within this support that we're trying to create for our veterans between, you know, the VA hospital and the Peer-to-Peer and everything that we're trying to do. The tighter we can create the weave, the more support our military will have, and we still have a work to do, but this is a wonderful idea, so thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Absolutely. I should also mention that the logistics of having a county service officer at town hall will now allow Town of Brookhaven residents the ability to not have to travel all the way to Hauppauge. They can visit a service office right in town hall and make not only accessing enhanced services but make that access easier on the part of the veteran.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Everybody good? Okay. So 1366 is before us. I'll call the vote. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? IR 1366 is **approved (5-0-0-0)**

Okay. Everybody else good? All right. Thank you, everyone.

*(*Meeting was adjourned at 2:11 p.m. *)*