

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 May 23, 2013.

Members Present:

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

Also In Attendance:

George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature
Paul Perillie - Aide to Legislator Gregory
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veteran's Services
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director/Office of the Aging
Joe Muncey - Budget Review Office
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken and Transcribed By:

Gabrielle Skolom - Court Stenographer

*(*Meeting was called to order at 1:18 p.m. *)*

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the committee on Veterans and Seniors. Please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Anker.

*(*Salutation*)*

I'm going to ask everyone to please remain standing and join us in a moment of silence as we mourn the passing of Navy Seal Jonathan Kaloust, a Long Island resident, as well as all of our brave men and woman fighting for our freedoms overseas, keeping them in our thoughts and prayers.

*(*Moment of Silence Observed*)*

Thank you.

Again, welcome, everybody. Thank you for being with us today. We do not have items on our legislative agenda, but we do have some important guests with us. First up, I will have Holly come on up and join us.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Hello, everybody. I don't have a lot to report. We did have our luncheon last month, which was attended by about 550 people. We had our honorees. We had a woman from Town of Southampton, who was our senior of the year, and we had a [high cap] volunteer as our community leader of the year. It went very well. We also have the picnic that I just have a date for, July 16. If you would like to come out to Southaven Park, that date is set, and we have July 17 as the rain date, so those are the two events that we do each year.

The Office has been pretty business with phone calls lately on the changes to the Medicaid Managed Care. You know, it went from being DSS to a regional -- a regional corporation that's making decisions on who's going where, and people have to make decisions on plans, but it is for the dual eligibles, so we have been getting phone calls. It is a little confusing, so we've been doing some training within the office on that as well.

I'm trying to think if there's anything else going on. Just the normal.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly, on that issue, are there any deadlines that anybody needs to be aware of, advised of at this point, or they're just calling in for information?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

They call in because they get letters and they're not sure what the letters mean, so we've been trying to assist people as best we can with that, but it's confusing, so we have to learn it first as we can help people.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

Holly, I just want to thank you for all the work that you've done, and I attended the senior celebration at Villa Lombardi, and 550 seniors, that's a lot of people to have an event for, and

everybody had such a good time. I've never seen so many people do a line dance.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

They like to dance.

LEG. ANKER:

They love to dance.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

They don't want to talk to anybody; they just like to do their dance thing. It's nice. And we have some of the repeats, the one lady who's been coming for years -- it's kind of fun to watch -- who lost her sister, used to dance with her, so it's an entertaining day for them and for us, so it's kind of good.

LEG. ANKER:

They are all smiles, and they are having such a good time, and I mean some of the people there are in their 90s, right?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Actually, I think there's been a couple of years where we've had over a hundred -- we've had 100-year-olds there. 100 has become the new 90. I mean, we have an unbelievable number of people that are over 100 now that we're working with in different programs, which, you know, going back 15 years ago, a 100-year-old was hard to find.

LEG. BARRAGA:

So does that mean that 70 is the new 40?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Absolutely. We'd all go back to 21, if I could help it.

Anybody have anything for me? No? Enjoy your Memorial Day. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

It's our pleasure to welcome Peggy Orsino, the Executive Director of RSVP. Welcome.

MS. ORSINO:

There we are. We're on the air. I have with me some of the RSVP brochures that we wish the Legislators take back to their district office for their seniors, and I also have brochures for Honor Flight Long Island, which is something near and dear to me because I went in place of my dad two falls ago when he passed away before the flight that he was booked on happened. And it's a wonderful thing, and it's very under-publicized for World War II Vets at this point, and we're losing them faster than we can count, and we've changed the brochure to -- it used to say, "Are you a World War II Vet?" Now it says, "Do you know a World War II Vet?" because many of them are in assisted livings and nursing homes and being taken care of by their adult children. So we just want to get the word out, on September 28, that flight will hold its thousandth World War II vet, and from personal experience, it's such a moving day for everybody that's at the memorial, which is beautiful, and unfortunately was only dedicated about nine years ago, so we need to get the rest of the World War II Vets to the memorial before it's too late, so we have Honor Flight brochures here.

And the RSVP brochures, that's another one that's near and dear to my heart. They're doing well. The Retired Senior Volunteer Program has to date 1,127 enrolled seniors from all across Suffolk County, who, last year, served the County organizations that are not-for-profits that we partner with 127,000 hours, which is equivalent to about \$2.9 million worth of manpower, according to

IndependentSector.com. And this is money that organizations certainly don't have for assistance with delivering their mission and programs, and as so many of the seniors say to me, I don't know who's getting more out of this, me or them, 'cause there's been so many different surveys done that United Healthcare came out with one in 2011 that said that of the people that they asked over 65, "What does volunteering do for you?" 73 percent of them said that it has made -- it enhanced their health and enhanced their quality of life; and surprisingly enough, another, like, 67 percent answered that their self-reported health is actually better than their health on file.

So being otherwise focused in our community and helping others really does get you out of yourself and gives you a purpose, so we're always looking for more seniors over 55. The Corporation for National Service, which gives us some of our Federal funding, and then through the generosity of the Suffolk County Office for the Aging, we're able to keep about 125 different organizations pretty well-assisted with volunteers, which also helps us to give the volunteer coming into the office one-stop shopping, so to speak. It's clearinghouse so that if you come in and say, "I would really like to -- well, we had a challenge a couple of weeks ago. There was a man who just retired from the Garment District, and he said, "I bet you can't help me find a job where I can run an industrial sewing machine," and I was like, Hm. I said, "Well, give us a couple of days, and we'll get back to you." I'm happy to report he's at Long Island Maritime Museum and he's sewing sails for them, and they are thrilled to pieces, and he's thrilled to pieces to be behind a machine again.

So sometimes, we get requests like that, but at other times, we get requests from seniors that just, you know -- well, of course, you ask a retired teacher, "Would you like to work with children?" and they say, "No, I never want to see another kid in my life," so they will go to environmental centers and hospitals and soup kitchens, and it's all about feeling like you're making a difference in somebody's life, and volunteerism now is not about stuffing envelopes, and so we have a whole bunch of seniors that have a lifetimes of experience, past professional skills that they're more than willing to share, and we need to tap into those that are behind the door.

Corporation did a survey not too long ago, and 42 percent of the respondents to the question, "Why haven't you volunteered," answered, "Because I haven't been asked," so that's what RSVP is there to do, is do the asking, and I was at Legislator Nowick's and Legislator Kennedy's senior health fairs in the past couple weeks, and it's a really nice way of getting the word out to the community; and being a non-for-profit, we can't -- you know, we don't have any budget at all for public relations, so it is up to us to get out there, and I ask the Legislators that they put the brochures in their district offices and talk us up because we would like to break 1200 seniors this year.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Muratore.

LEG. MURATORE:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. Peggy, you know, just on your Honor Flight, I had the privilege when I first got into office of sponsoring a veteran, and it's such a wonderful experience. I went down to the airport, I met him, and he was on the same beach that my uncle and father was on World War II. They don't talk about their experiences, but it made me cry. You know, he was in a wheelchair; he had a walker; and I couldn't go on the flight, but I got to push him and speak with him a while, so for my colleagues, and for the record, it's a great program; and to pay homage to our veterans with that, it's a wonderful experience for the person doing the sponsoring, and I know it is for the person going down there to see that World War II memorial. So keep up the good work here, and I try -- I sell this. I try and get people to do this for our veterans. Thank you for all you've been doing.

MS. ORSINO:

Thank you. The numbers are lessening, and I have to say, having been to the memorial, I

was -- they call it a guardian, which is really escorting veterans to the memorial. I had three, two that were ambulatory and one man in a wheelchair, and everywhere we went, like the Baltimore Airport, people just clapped and were yelling, "Thank you for your service." I was crying the whole day. We got a standing ovation at a restaurant in Maryland. When all the vets walked in, the whole restaurant stood up and started clapping. Here I am crying, and the veterans that I was escorting were saying, "Come on. Pull yourself together, will you. We're supposed to be crying." But it was just a very moving day, and if anybody has that experience to sponsor or be there, it's unbelievable.

LEG. MURATORE:

Well, actually, you know, what we do here, we owe to them. You know, this Legislature, there's freedoms we have, and that's why I thank them every day, because without their service, we might be doing business in a different manner.

MS. ORSINO:

I know. My dad, one of his favorite sweatshirts was "If you can read this, thank a teacher; if you can read it in English, thank a soldier."

LEG. STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

As far as reaching out with the flight program, do you visit the VFW posts, or how do you get the word out?

MS. ORSINO:

We have a quite a number of volunteers that are veterans themselves, so they've been able to cover the American Legions and the VFWs and the VA hospital, and we're even -- I have some people on the RSVP Board of Directors that are nursing home administrators, and they're going to go back to the nursing homes because the Honor Flight will take people that are on oxygen and that are in wheelchairs also because so many of the vets are at this point.

LEG. ANKER:

Okay, and I will pass that information onto my VF Post. I just came from an event celebrating the development, the first development, I guess in the country, specifically for vets. And there was a large congregation of our military men and woman there, but I'll do my best, at least covering it in my area, District 6.

The other question has to do with RSVP. Do you visit senior communities to talk about your program?

MS. ORSINO:

Oh, yes. Yeah, definitely. We're always out there un-turning stones and going to senior centers and senior housing. We have one of our programs, it's been a very nice venue for getting our word out, and that is the chronic disease self-management program. We have five verified trained master trainers from the University of Stanford that give a six-week workshop in how to better manage your chronic conditions, and the curriculum was developed by Stanford. It's a very cost-effective health program for people over 60. The statistics say you have -- usually have two chronic conditions. And I kind of had to laugh when I went into the training; I was like, Not really. Well, I turned out to have three. I was like, Oh my. But it's a way of managing your chronic conditions, and they have showed -- it's an evidence-based program -- that it actually lowers the hospitalization rates and lowers the ER visits, and that has been a great way of bringing together a whole bunch of seniors. They take our brochures and go back out into the community and, you

know, serve the senior clubs and stuff.

LEG. ANKER:

Well, I'd like to personally invite you to come to my many senior communities in my district, so I'll have my staff reach out to you and I'd love to have you come over to my area. Thank you.

MS. ORSINO:

That would be great. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Peggy, as always, thank you so much. Thanks for being with us, of course.

MS. ORSINO:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And thank you for all the great work that you continue to do.

Maggie? It's our pleasure to welcome Maggie Bobas, Executive Director of Hand-in-Hand for Seniors. Welcome.

MS. BOBAS:

Thank you for having me. I would just like to say first that as far as Hand-in-Hand for Seniors goes and as far as this committee goes, I have a father who is a full-bird retired Marine Corps colonel, so that explains my tenacity. And I have my parents who are in their late 80s, and I had a grandmother who lived with me my entire life and lived to be up to 100 years old, never had a moment's issue, so that kind of will explain a little bit as to where I come from.

As far as Hand-in-Hand goes. To some degree, I'm preaching to the choir, but I'd like to introduce you to my friend sitting right here, which I know is probably not popular after the whole Clint Eastwood debacle, but this is my friend sitting here. She or he is 60, 70, 80, 90 years old; suffers from an array of ailments: diabetes, cancer, Alzheimer's, dementia; unable to mobilize within their own home; unable to leave the house. She doesn't really remember me when I come over. There's lots of things going on. She doesn't really want to ride that bus that they do have for seniors because she's unsafe on it or she's frightened on it and it doesn't take her to her doorstep and back. She's nervous about so many things, and she's lonely.

And, then, this friend that's sitting here is just someone who wants to have the opportunity to go out to the supermarket, to go out to lunch, to go out to get her hair done, to go to the exercise class, to leave to go to the yoga class, to leave to go to the Buddhist class. She wants to work with the kids at school to bridge the generation gap. She wants to attend seminars and conferences. She wants to enjoy the rest of her years, or he or she wants to enjoy the rest of their years.

So what is Hand-in-Hand? Hand-in-Hand is really a small not-for-profit organization just in its infancy stage that wants to do all those things for all those people, whether it be for someone who needs assistance within the home and the environment and finding good help within the home safely and securely; or it's somebody who wants to get out there and move and groove and do lots of things with us. I have tried to explain, although poorly, seniors as they age developmentally is no different than viewing a first grader and a senior in high school. What one needs and one wants, the other doesn't necessarily need and want, and we have to start to look at seniors in a broad spectrum and stop trying to kind of shove everybody into that cookie cutter mold.

I think that, of course, we all know that times are difficult, money is difficult, money's tight, and because some services are offered for people -- we all say, "Well, there's a cooling center," you know, and this should suffice, and this should whatever, and I don't necessarily agree with that philosophy. I think that we should be offering our beloved seniors the best of the best. It's no different than any other group that we're trying to take care of and help and assist. They should be offered the best of the best and whatever that may be. So that's kind of my whittled down speech in two minutes or less.

LEG. STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

I'm looking at your brochure. Now, you're located in Huntington, in Huntington Township. Do you go outside of that Township?

MS. BOBAS:

We do not go out of Huntington Township, but Huntington itself is very -- it's a large area. The agency, when it started, was originally mimicking the village-to-village movement, but as we know on Long Island, it's been difficult to replicate that model, A, because of transportation, which is just so difficult, and also because the Township of Huntington is so widespread, but that's also the original premise was the village-to-village model.

LEG. ANKER:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Barraga.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Thank you. I wanted to ask, I was taking a look at the different services that you make available to seniors. Are these services made available in the sense that you recommend or suggest areas that they can go to for help and assistance? I mean, from a financial perspective, like minor home repair and maintenance, your organization doesn't supply any funding for that. What do you do in that case? Do you come to me as a senior and recommend a particular contractor or something to do minor home and maintenance repair on a house or what?

MS. BOBAS:

In an instance like that, if I were going to someone's home and see like -- a perfect case was the railing was very rickety, I refer to the Town of Huntington, which has programs that provide these type of things to seniors for free. Just, you have to pay for the supplies or whatever, so I referred to the Town of Huntington's repairman service program, and they come in and they help the seniors with it.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Is your organization sort of like a middleman for these people?

MS. BOBAS:

I'm the bridge. I'm bridging the gap when it comes to seniors within their homes and trying to help them gain services, and then we also do provide lunch and learns and speaker services, recreation and social services, but when it comes within the households, we are the bridge to help people find services to -- for free or minimal cost.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Well, like recreational services, do you provide transportation for these folks to get to these recreational services?

MS. BOBAS:

We do, actually. Many of our volunteers drive the seniors to the social and recreational activities.

LEG. BARRAGA:

What if a senior has to -- needed assistance with reference to weekly shopping or something like that? Do you provide those services?

MS. BOBAS:

Yes, if they need us and they ask us, and they -- you know, as we're growing, we have done that. If it's something that's out of our, something that we can't provide, I look to a provider to help provide that service.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Many of the things that you do, do you depend on volunteers to do it, or do you have financial resources?

MS. BOBAS:

I do not have financial resources besides fundraising. I do depend on volunteers for 75, 80 percent of it, and then the other times, if I have to, I will go, and I will get someone to provide that service if I have to at a cost, and through fundraised dollars, go and spend those dollars to get things is difficult, but when you tell somebody you're going to help them, you have to come through and help them. So while I'm sure my board of directors is not pleased with me when I spend some of our money, I do spend some of the money sometimes to get a provider to give somebody whatever it is they need.

LEG. BARRAGA:

But in any case, you're almost acting as a referral service to the county or the town if those municipalities provide the services.

MS. BOBAS:

Whenever possible, I do that. Whenever possible, I do that, but there's some nuances that fall between the cracks.

LEG. BARRAGA:

In a way, you're sort of doing what my office does. I mean, I'm a Legislator, but we run a heavy constituent service, so most of time we're either contacting the County or Town or the Feds on some issue relating to a constituent, not necessarily a senior citizen, but in many cases they are. I'm just trying to get a better sense of what you're actually doing, what you're actually providing versus what you're actually referring.

MS. BOBAS:

We try to refer whenever possible, but when I can't and don't, I'm the bridge. But whenever -- I feel when I'm committed to a person, I feel like whatever it takes, I have to do. So maybe it's less likely that that occurs, but I guess my point is is that it has occurred, and when you have to do something for someone, you do whatever it takes.

LEG. BARRAGA:

All right. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Also, as we see here from the brochure, bringing various organizations together to get information out the seniors, to perhaps their families, and to the community. You have a program coming up at the end of the month, and it brings together a lot of different organizations under one roof as a way to get information. And particularly noticeable here are some of the agencies from Suffolk County level of government as well as the Touro Senior Citizens Law Program, and I know that they feel it's very important to get their message out that they're there and provide those kinds of services, so this is a great way to bring that information to the community.

MS. BOBAS:

Yes. May 30 -- May is Older Americans Month, so we are, you know, with your office, we are hopefully putting -- we put together, I think, a great panel and a great table of people from every possible end of senior services down in our office, which was relatively large facility, and hopefully we will have lots of people come and walk through. Most of those services are for free, and we're hoping to help people understand better what is out there and, again, just bridge the gap.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Well, thank you so much for being with us today.

MS. BOBAS:

Thank you for having me.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Anybody else? Anybody else for the committee? All right. We are adjourned. Thank you.

*(*Meeting was adjourned at 1:42 p.m. *)*