

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 July 22, 2013.

Members Present:

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

Also In Attendance:

Renee Ortiz - Chief Deputy Clerk
George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature
Debbie Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern
Michael Pitcher - Aide to Presiding Officer Lindsay
Paul Perillie - Aide to Legislator Gregory
Kevin LaValle - Aide to Legislator Muratore
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veteran's Services
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director of Office for the Aging
Denise Doty - Touro Law School
Rick Brand - Newsday
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken and Transcribed By:

Gabrielle Severs - Court Stenographer

VS 7/22/2013

*(*The meeting was called to order at 2:48 p.m. *)*

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Welcome, everybody, this afternoon to the committee on veterans and seniors. If you are not going to be the auditorium and you're carrying on a conversation, and you're not here for the committee, I'm going to ask that you take the conversation outside. If you are here for Vets and Seniors, I'm going to ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Barraga.

*(*Salutation*)*

Please remain standing and join us in a moment of silence as we keep all our brave men and women fighting for our freedoms overseas in our thoughts and prayers.

*(*Moment of Silence Observed. *)*

We have -- Denise Doty is with us. Did I see the director? Here he is. So before we have -- well, Denise is going to speak as part of public portion, right? Did you fill out a card?

MS. DOTY:

Yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Why don't we have you come on up first. You can go to the podium, you can go to the table, whichever you're more comfortable with.

MS. DOTY:

Hi. Good afternoon.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Denise, before you begin, so you're limited to the three minutes.

MS. DOTY:

Okay. Thank you. Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for having me here today, and I know you've already had a long day. I am the director of the senior citizens law program at Touro Law Center. I appeared in front of you a few months ago with my staff attorney Gillian Alman, and we discussed at that time the possibility of trying to appropriate some additional funding for the program. Our current budget is \$218,675. We have two attorneys and a paralegal. That funding has remained the same four years running. We serve a very large amount of seniors in Suffolk County. Last year, we did over 650 legal cases. We did approximately a thousand or close to that of information and assistance. We appear in court. We appear at Medicaid fair hearings. We visit clients in their homes and hospitals. We do community education. We're operating on an extremely tight budget, and we are asking for a small additional appropriation to try to allow us to further and better serve our seniors.

Last year, our travel budget was limited to \$167, and the reason we were able to continue traveling was that Touro Law Center donated some money from their clinical budget to assist us. The school was no longer able to continue making any kinds of subsidies to the program because of internal financial issues at the school. Last year, they donated a little bit more than \$4,000 to the program. That's one of the primary things we'd like to do.

We'd also like to be able to attend some more complex legal education programs dealing with issues for -- that address our population as well as perhaps being able to join some of the -- NAELA and some of the other organizations directed towards seniors. Those were the primary things that we'd

like to do and really try to help, further help our senior population. I think that the information we had shared with Senator Stern was there was also some contemplation about a small two percent increase for those of us working in the program, and that was to keep in line with Touro Law Center's cost of living increase to their employees, which cannot be extended to us since we are not Touro employees.

Some of you may have questions, and I don't want to take up all three minutes speaking if there's anything I can address for you that may assist you in making a decision for this appropriation.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Any questions? Okay. All good. Thank you for being with us today.

MS. DOTY:

Thank you, Legislator Stern.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

That was part of public portion. Is there anybody else that would like to address the committee as part of public portion? Seeing none, public portion will be closed.

Director Ronayne.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, members. Thank you, as always, for the invitation to appear before you. Quite honestly, calendars have evolved a little bit over the course of the day today. I have been in a training all day, and I didn't expect that the committee would run so late. I did not prepare a presentation for you, but I would just like to inform you that we are working hard as always. The staff at the Veterans Service Agency is exceeding my expectations on a daily basis. I'm just always thankful to be as fortunate as I am to have a committed and dedicated staff as they are. We do, since the last time I appeared here, we do have one new veterans service officer who started with us. That service officer, as well as Veterans Service Officer Shayna Morris, who had appeared here I think two sessions ago, they are both away in Syracuse for the week receiving their veterans service officer basic training, which is required for their credentialing process. We're looking forward to them returning next Monday and having bright-eyed and had well-trained service officers to add to the fray and help us to continue the work that we do. Good stuff.

I also am not sure if this was on your calendar or not, but I wanted to just speak in favor of or in support of a CN that I believe was submitted today regarding the expansion of veterans services to the Town of Southampton. We have spoken with the Town of Southampton. We've examined the logistics involved and the demographics involved and my personal view, and I think the view of my staff and the office of the County Executive is that this would be a net positive for the veterans population by expanding and increasing both the presence and the level of veterans services to be made aware to the residents of the Town of Southampton.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, is this essentially based on the same model that you are working now with Town of Brookhaven, or is it something different?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

It would be a shared service agreement. Again, the model would be similar to the one that is in use very successfully, I might add, in the works now in the Town of Brookhaven. The only difference would be the amount of time that the service officer would spend in Southampton. That would be limited to one day per week versus the two and three alternating days that we spend in Brookhaven.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Barraga.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Tom, why don't you give us an update in terms of the different programs that were set up with reference to treat PTSD. I mean, I think the last time you spoke to us, you had indicated that several of the programs were going along in a very positive fashion, that the veterans were coming forward, that you were pleased with the results so far. Can you kind of give us an update in terms of where that stands?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I think you're probably referring specifically to the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans PTSD peer support program, which is the peer support model that we had launched this. This is the second year of the program. This is the program that was fund by New York State last year as a pilot. Suffolk was the first of four counties identified to participate in that pilot. Suffolk has been granted -- I have a clear bias in this issue -- but Suffolk has been the more successful of the four original counties on the program.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Weren't you asked to give a presentation before a number of other counties to indicate to them how the program was performing in Suffolk?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That meeting, actually, was postponed. It hasn't taken place yet. It's in the process of being rescheduled, but, yes, we have been asked to speak to a group, a mini conference, if you will, of representatives from all of the, what now totals, 11 counties throughout the state.

LEG. BARRAGA:

When the veteran comes in in this particular program, do they for the most part come alone, or do they bring family with them, or does family participate or not?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I would have to say honestly all of the above. We are contacted by individual veterans. We have had veterans come in with family members, friends, loved ones, battle buddies, folks that they have served with. We also -- it's not at all uncommon for us to be contacted not by the veteran directly but by a parent, a spouse, or another person close to that veteran to inquire more information, meeting schedules, meeting location information, things of that nature so that they might also assist in encouraging the veterans to come in, so it's really sort of a mix.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Do you have any contact with the program in Bay Shore that's run by North Shore LIJ?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes. In fact, I just left Mr. Roberts, Andy Roberts, who is the program coordinator for LIJ.

LEG. BARRAGA:

That's a family-oriented type of concept, treat the families as well as the veterans.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes. And that facility, just so everybody is clear, is very unique. The model that they have applied there is under one roof in one building, they have the Department of Veterans Affairs, which is an extension of the Northport VA Medical Center and the LIJ Rosen Family Wellness Center operating under the same roof. And while they occupy different portions of the same building, they have the ability to share and link services during one visit. They do encourage family members to participate and to attend, and based on what I'm being told, it also is proving to be successful.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Just for the record, I served with Admiral Rosen; very fine gentleman.

VS 7/22/2013

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, his legacy is continuing to serve the veterans well.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Thank you, Tom.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you. And to be clear, for the purposes of our discussion, the Rosen Wellness Center is available to military personnel, veterans, and their families. This program is both confidential and available at no cost to the participants in the program. The program is also open to members of law enforcement, the firematic services, and other first responders and their families. So the program is really doing a great job of serving our community.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Anybody else for the director? Director Ronayne, thank you, as always. It's always good to see you.

We'll go to the agenda now. We have one *Introductory Resolution* before us.

That is **IR 1548, Amending the 2013 Operating Budget and transferring funds within the Office of the County Executive to provide funding for Legal Assistance to the Elderly (County Executive)**. I'll make a motion to approve. Second by Legislator Anker.

Very quickly, on the motion, this is the federally-mandated Legal Services to the Elderly Program that is provided for Suffolk County seniors through Touro Law School. They have been doing so now for several years. As Denise Doty, representative of the program, let us know today, it has been exactly the same dollar amount that's been used to fund that program over the past few years. This would increase that amount by a relatively nominal amount of \$10,000 to cover all the increased expenses that she outlined in her testimony today.

Let me just add that since Touro Law School has taken over the program over the past few years, the services that they have provided to the elderly throughout all of Suffolk County has literally saved Suffolk County taxpayers over a million dollars, and so this is good bang for our buck.

Anybody else on the motion? I'll call the vote. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? 1548 is **approved (VOTE: 4-0-0-1, Absent: Muratore)**.

Anybody else? All right. Thank you very much. Before we close, let me just add for the record, Legislator Muratore has an excused absence. Thank you.

(*Meeting adjourned at 3:02 p.m. *)