

**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 September 30, 2013.

**Members Present:**

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

**Also In Attendance:**

Renee Ortiz - Chief Deputy Clerk  
George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature  
Debbie Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern  
Paul Perillie - Aide to Legislator Gregory  
Kevin LaValle - Aide to Legislator Muratore  
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director of Office for the Aging  
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veteran's Service  
Wilkens Young - Veteran/Peer to Peer Program  
Rick Brand - Newsday  
All Other Interested Parties

**Minutes Taken and Transcribed By:**

Gabrielle Severs - Court Stenographer

*(\*The meeting was called to order at 1:08 p.m. \*)*

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the Committee on Veterans and Seniors. I'm going to ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Muratore.

*(\*Salutation\*)*

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

*(\*Moment of Silence Observed\*)*

Thank you.

Let's -- we do have a couple items on the agenda resolutions. Holly is with us. Holly, I'm going to have you come on up and make your presentation. I think one of the resolutions is yours. We'll talk about that as well. Welcome.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Yeah. Hi everybody. The resolution that you're going to see today is for an additional \$20,000 for Triple A transportation. The funding is 100 percent state funded. The total for the whole is that \$80,000. It's fluctuated over the course of the last several years. It was much as -- almost double, about 120,000, and now it's down to 80,000 with this additional 20. And the money is used for expanding transportation for shopping, doctors' appointments, and it's offered to the 10 towns and a couple of our non-profits. There are two towns that have declined the funding and -- because it is small. It's like \$8,000 a contractor and they didn't feel it was worth taking the funding. We are giving it out to the other people. So it's 100 percent funded. This helps us out to help them with our expenses.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Sounds good.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

That's on the resolution. Thank you for your support on that. I don't have a presentation. I just came back from a week's vacation and fighting a fire all night, so I'm shot.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Well, thank you.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Thanks.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Let's go ahead to the IRs on the agenda. They are grants, so let's take up those.

*Introductory Resolutions*

**IR 1729, Amending the 2013 Adopted Operating Budget to accept and appropriate 100% additional State Aid from the New York State Office of Mental Health to Clubhouse of Suffolk for the purpose of continuing a Pilot Program in Suffolk County to assist veterans**

**suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.** This is a 100-percent state grant, so this can go on the consent calendar. I'll make a motion to approve and place on the consent calendar.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Second.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Second by second by Legislator Barraga. I'll call the vote. All in favor? Opposed? Any Abstentions?  
**IR 1729 is approved and placed on the consent calendar. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)**

**IR 1769, Accepting and appropriating 100% reimbursable grant funds from the New York State Office for the Aging.** This is all good. This can also be placed on the consent calendar. I'll make the motion to approve and place on the consent calendar. Second by Legislator Muratore. Anybody on the motion? I'll call the vote. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions?  
**IR 1769 is approved and placed on the consent calendar. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)**

*(\*Director Ronayne entered the meeting\*)*

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

With us today is Wilkens Young. Thank you for being with us today. I will have you come on up with Director Ronayne, who has been sitting here for quite some time patiently.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

My apologies for being late. I was held up.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

How are you doing?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Where are we?

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

We are at just -- perfect timing. We are at you. Perfect timing. Just to let you know, Tom, we did pay unanimously IR 1729, which was the state grant to assist veterans suffering from PTSD, so that has been approved. But if you can maybe speak to the program and talk about all the works that you are doing, I know my colleagues and myself would appreciate that. So welcome.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Thank you. Firstly, I would just continue on my high with this program. We are just very, very happy with where we are within the program. I'm extraordinarily proud of everyone who was working on the program. The successes have been tremendous. We continue to have successes, and many of them are coming from unexpected places. We're experiencing things that we probably could never have projected. I'll give you a bit of an extreme example, but we were able, over this weekend, to respond to a tragedy that occurred within our community. We had done an escort at MacArthur Airport on Saturday morning to wish off the World War II veterans who were participating in Honor Flight. When the ceremony had ended, we were leaving the airport, and one of our motorcycle riders was killed in a traffic accident leaving the airport. Obviously, that is a terrible tragedy, but as the event and the programs of the day went on, we had concerns, and we had many discussions over the course of the day as to what the impact of this death might be not only on those of us who knew Chris but those who were otherwise affiliated with the event that took place, and specifically, the discussion came down to the World War II veterans who had gone to Washington. And I know the Legislator Gregory and The General, I think, would agree with me: Most of these World War II veterans are combat veterans, and my concern became while they were

conducting their trip to Washington as a part of Honor Flight, that any latent PTSD might have been triggered by a loss associated with anything particular they had been involved in, and there was a great concern about whether or not we would resurrect any issues or feelings of guilt, which is very common amongst veterans in combat. There's -- survivors guilt is a very real issue that we deal with, and it was agreed that we have this wonderful resource available to us. We have the Joseph Dwyer Peer Support Program. We've got trained individuals. We've got combat veterans. Who better to meet these veterans returning from Washington D.C. on Saturday night and to be available for them right as they deplane, as they arrive at MacArthur Airport if there was anybody who had to meet with, whether privately or as a group, to discuss the issue or their feelings surrounding the death.

And again, it's an extreme example, but I think it demonstrates that this program is truly proving its value in areas that we had never expected. Two years ago had -- God forbid, had this tragedy had occurred two years ago, we would not have had those -- that type of resources available. We would have probably come up with something, but we wouldn't have had that tool in our kit, and it just proved to be spot-on, the right thing in that situation.

We are having regular success with calls that we receive off hours in the evenings, over the weekends with veterans struggling with alcohol- or drug-related issues. Almost universally, as a result of self-medicating related to their PTSD, we're having just many, many successes, and the successes go beyond talking somebody down or talking somebody through a crisis.

Wilkens Young is here. I mean, he'll tell you we're providing housing for some of these folks. Some of these guys were unemployed, suffering from PTSD, self-medicating, and finding themselves homeless. We're providing places for them to live. We're putting safe roofs over their head, three hot meals a day, support, both actively and passively supporting them. So the program is just -- it's been such an extraordinary blessing to Suffolk County and the veterans in Suffolk County. I don't know how we ever got along without it.

And one additional piece of good news: We've spoken several times about the inclusion of family members in the program, and we are finally at a place where we'll be introducing the program to family members and we'll be siting the initial family support meetings at the joint V.A-L.I.J. facility on Montauk Highway in Bay Shore, which I think is Legislator Barraga's district.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Uh-huh.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

We have met with the officials from both V.A. and L.I.J. They are as excited as we are about introducing this program or expanding it to build beyond our veterans and to actually include the circle of family and family members and loved ones in their lives, and I just see this growing.

My efforts about now, we're getting into budget season. It's about the point in time of the year where I have to re-start devoting my efforts to ensuring that we articulate a strong position when we go back to Albany and seek continuation of funding. Because at this point, as we discussed two years ago when we introduced the possibility of a pilot, now that we've got something as solidly demonstrated successful as we do, to pull the rug out from under, it would be a tragedy. We also, in keeping with the original discussion and intent, beyond government funding, we are hopeful that at some point in the future that we'll be able to support this program through private grants, corporate support and other areas where we wouldn't be reliant on public dollars to pay the bills and to continue. In some cases, it's actually easier once those grants are secured to maintain them, so we're in a very good place right now.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good.

**MR. YOUNG:**

Just to piggyback on what Tom was saying that the program has definitely been a benefit for veterans. I'm a veteran myself, and I suffer from PTSD but most of all facilitating in the program. We went from 3 programs to 10 groups all over Long Island, and as being a facilitator, I have seen the benefits of it as watching men that were struggling with certain issues be able to come to the table among their peers and get the right suggestions that they need. I find a lot of them are hesitant to go to the doctor because they don't want a prescription. They want some understanding. They want some compassion. They want to be able to sit down and get some information from somebody that's been through what they went through so they can figure out how they worked it out so we could work it out together.

We've been on a couple rescue missions where actually someone in the group was having a difficult time, called a special meeting together, got together, was able to get him some food, get him a place to stay, as Tom was saying, and get everything back on life which meant so much to him. I had an individual in my group that came from Baltimore and was really struggling and couldn't get any idea where he wanted to go. He was very educated and also had a very high ranking in the military, and he ended up getting with us, getting his confidence back together, getting his benefits, moving down to Florida and getting a good job. You know, when he goes back, he always says, you know, Thank you, guys, because those little meetings we used to have over at the Avery Building where we first started at was what gave him, you know, the encouragement to go on. The thing I like about it so much was once he found his way, he started helping other veterans in the group. Somebody would say, Man, I need to get to the V.A.; he's be like, Oh, man, I'll drive you up there, don't worry about it, just be there at such and such a time. So he started taking a leadership position also after he got what he needed. So as Tom would say, it's a definitely positive thing for us as veterans to be able to sit around a table with your peers and get the guidance that you need in order to be productive members of society again, so failure to support this would be a lot of harm to a lot of good people.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

As veterans move through our programs, I -- my view and certainly everybody on the program does not agree with my position on this, but I don't think anybody actually graduates from our program. I think certain people may go through it and go on to other things, but I don't believe that we actually have anybody graduating from our program because there may be a time when they feel the need to return.

What we do find is that as veterans -- and now that we've been doing this for a little while, as veterans proceed and go on throughout the program, in most cases we've created another ambassador for the program to go out there and share with his contemporaries, with his peers, with his fellow veterans what this program represents, how it operates. And probably -- I have said this before -- the single greatest thing that we have in this program -- everything else that we do is wonderful, but without trust, we have nothing. And we have been able to put together a set of ideas and a group of people who have been very, very successful in developing and establishing trust and then maintaining that trust, which is important to everybody but certainly the veterans on a level which is very meaningful to us. And when we trust someone, we'll be more inclined to share and be open with them. That's been a big, big part of what we've been able to accomplish. So as they move on and they become ambassadors of the program, word of mouth is our best advertisement right now. They educate, they go out there, they spread our word, and people want to come in and find out what it is that we're all about.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Tom, as you continue to grow the program and as, particularly, you start to work with family members, will the model be the same? Will it work on the same limited group system? Will there be limited groups and areas and a similar plan or vision for branching out into other areas? What do you see as happening?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

The plan right now is to launch one family group per week. Obviously, as the need demonstrates, if there's no response, then we would perhaps taper back. If there's a demand that requires more than that one group per week, then we would certainly move to increase the numbers. The model that we'll apply is very, very similar to what we're doing with the peers. We do not want groups to exceed eight to ten members maximum. Beyond that, we think the individuality of the participants in the group is lost. Not everybody always will have the opportunity to participate actively in a larger group setting. So when we reach that eight to ten participant number, we would look to spinoff and create a second group. We do intend to expand these to other locations. We've got to start somewhere. That facility seemed like a good choice, and going forward, honestly, having not done the peer -- the family member group yet, I can't say much about them other than we are hopeful. We anticipate that they will be just as successful.

And as you've also heard me say in the past, so often it's not the veteran who initially contacts us. It's not the veteran who initially comes to us. It is a family member. It's a loved one who may recognize things occurring in the veterans life that he himself may not recognize or may not want to acknowledge. There's a -- wives and moms are a powerful force, and we've been responding to that. We just, again, we look forward, through your support and the support of everybody behind the scenes who has been there for us, to make sure that this program was able to be implemented to watch it grow and to see us be where we are now.

I can tell you that we are also in the process of fairly significant expansions on the program. We just hired three new facilitators. We have an intern on the program, a social worker intern on the program, and we are probably at some point in the near future likely to hire two more additional facilitators. We have agreements -- we've begun working back into the colleges who break during the summer off season. By November, we project probably -- the numbers right now on paper at least tell us that we'll have in excess of 20 groups, possibly as many as 24 groups by the end of November. So clearly, there's a lot of work yet to be done. It's a great thing, and I can tell you that we are the envy of many other places because we do hear from other counties who want to know how we were able to gain the traction that we have when they have not had similar successes in some of the other counties who have had the program brought to them.

**LEG. GREGORY:**

Hey, Tom. Thank you for the update. This program is such a wonderful program, and you actually touched something that I want to talk to you about, that how the families probably, I would think, may be in tune more so than the soldier, the veteran, and what they're dealing with. They'll see the signs, change in behaviors. How are the groups -- and you might have said this before -- how are we identifying them? Is there -- is it just strictly through peer-to-peer; I know someone who may benefit from the program? Is there some type of promotion?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

There's been a great deal of word of mouth. We have been very actively attending organization meetings, VFWs, American Legions, and so forth, and from those organizations, we have drawn some participants. Unfortunately, the newer generation of veterans who we thought that we would see would primarily make up the program, which has turned out to be the case, are not gravitating to these organizations in the numbers that they have in the past. So while the organizations have been providing us with, I believe, two World War II Veterans, several Korean War Veterans, and a

number of Vietnam Veterans. The OAFOEF Veterans are really more from being in the community. Bowling league night, if we know Thursday is a bowling league night at Commack Lanes, we're going to have a guy out there with flyers and literature on the program. If we know that veterans are congregating at a particular type of event -- Vets Rock, there's a Vets Rock concert in Brookhaven recently. If we know there's going to be a veteran population and attendance at an event, we're there. One example might be that on October 6, we will be hosting a picnic that, please, everybody is more than welcome. We would like very much to see any of you stop by. We'll be at Heckscher State Park from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and we anticipate somewhere on the order of between 200 and 300 veterans and family members. It's open to everybody. It's at no cost. We'll be serving food. I think we have a couple ponies coming for the children. I'm working with the army right now. They're going to be bringing us a rock wall for anybody who wants to -- anybody who hasn't been forced to climb a wall in a while can go ahead and do that; really, just actively being in the community, being a part of what's going on in our local communities. And the family members are just a critical part of that, because again, a lot of our referrals come from the family members.

And I think it's important, and just to expand on your point, more so than simply having the family members and the loved ones observe the changes in their veteran and what's different about them upon their return home from deployment, don't forget that their lives have been dramatically impacted by their deployments as well. The traditional roles of mother, father, husband, wife, when one part of the household deploys, there's a tremendous void that has to be filled, and we've got issues when the service member return, and we've seen this historically. The husband goes off to war, he's gone a year, 15, 18 months. When he returns, while he was gone, the wife has assumed all of the traditional roles in the household. She has become the primary parent and disciplinarian of the children, the bill payer, the person who sits down on Sunday night and, you know, works out a budget and pays the bills, cuts the grass and attends to the maintenance issues around the house. We've actually had issues where veterans have difficult time adjusting to the fact that the return to traditional roles has not been as forthcoming as they might have expected. The family members who have remained home don't always want to give these things up. We have one wife who refuses to give back the lawn. She says, *That's my therapy, I get out there, I spend an hour a week out there cutting the grass mine, that's mine now.*

So in some cases, as you might imagine, there's an adjustment to be made there. When you compound little things like, I'm not allowed to cut my own grass anymore, when you compound it with all the other things that may or may not be going on in this veterans mind, the family is a huge component. You don't treat something like PTSD in a vacuum. You know, we've said this before: It does not occur in isolation. If I'm affected by PTSD, so is my wife, and so are my children, my coworkers, and anybody else in my circle to a greater or lesser degree.

I hope that answered your question.

**LEG. GREGORY:**

Yes. And I think you guys are just doing a great job, and I think because of the stigma of PTSD, I think the success will really exponentially improve our greater successes because as you have more peers going out promoting the program to people that they know that may suffer, those that have been kind of unwilling, they will be more willing to come forward because they know someone who has been treated and is, you know, is an ambassador, as you used the word before, to the program and is a great acceptance. So thank you and congratulations. Keep up the good work, and we look forward to hearing the next update where you have maybe 40 groups. All right. Thank you.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Well, Tom, I'm very happy to hear that you have developed a strategy to reach out to different groupings in order to generate interest in the program because the more traditional quasi-military organizations, like the American Legion, VFW, AMVETS, they've had a problem for years now in

terms of memberships. You know, you go to some of these American Legion Halls and you see very, very few because most of them are now gone, passed on, World War II Veterans. You'll see a number of Korean Veterans, even the youngest ones, the Korean Veterans are close to 80 years of age. The Vietnam Veterans never really assimilated into those organizations; they resisted them. And the younger veterans coming back, their lives are complicated. They are just not being drawn into a traditional type of quasi-military organization where they go once a week or a couple times a week and just sit there. So the strategy of reaching out to different events in the community to generate interest is the right way to go.

I think what we're seeing, too, nationwide, a lot of these American Legion halls, VFW halls, they're closing. I know I've got one or two in my district. The buildings are kept going because they rent the facilities out almost on a weekly basis, but their membership is static and it's eroding based on who's moving away and who is passing on.

Let me ask you a question. I believe there were three World War II Veterans what went to Washington that day from MacArthur Airport. One of them happened to be a constituent of mine, and these gentlemen are all 86, 87 years of age. So what you're saying is that when they came back, these resources you're talking about were made known to them in case they needed any help or assistance?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I had been in contact with the organizers of the event while they were in Washington. By the time everything had transpired in the morning, their flight had already gotten airborne. I couldn't communicate until they had landed in Washington. They briefed all of the veterans. There were actually 65 World War II Veterans on the trip. When they were airborne on the return home, they were briefed --

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

How many left from MacArthur? I thought the article in the paper I saw only had just several. It was a total of 65 in our area?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Sixty-five flew out of MacArthur Airport on Saturday morning.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Oh. All right. I must have misread it, then. I thought it was much less.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Sixty-five veterans. I believe there were 60 guardians, or escorts, who attend to the veterans while they're on the trip, and then there were support staff and organizers. In fact, not to plug anybody -- I don't know much about their business -- but a business known as Job Lots sponsored the entire trip. They paid for the whole thing. But yeah, it was a significant --

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

All 65 were briefed in terms of if they need any help or assistance, it would be available to them once they came home?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

That's correct. And when they de-planed, when they came through the, for lack of a better word, the tunnel, they put up a curtain on the west side of the terminal so that when they come through, they come through single file, and they're greeted by -- there were about 150 people greeting them when they returned on Saturday night. There was some music playing and so forth. I was the first one they saw. The organizer, Mr. Kosick (ph), Chris Kosick was directly opposite me, so he was the

second person that they saw. And they had been told that there would be county people standing by, if anybody would like to speak to them about what happened here this morning, by all means. I should out of respect to Chris, Chris White was the gentleman who was killed on Saturday. Chris was not a veteran. Chris had not served, but he regularly volunteered his time. And in the case of Saturday morning, he was up and out of the house before his wife and children woke up, got on the road, participated in this event, and he unfortunately never returned home. But he interacted with these veterans before they were leaving. He was helping move veterans through the terminal in their wheelchairs, taking photographs with them, you know, engaging these people, so he was not an anonymous part of this larger event. He was a participant in this, and they did have an opportunity to encounter him.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

So most of these people coming back, all 65 had to be, what, 85 and older, right?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Some well into their 90s.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Yeah. You know, as far as Chris goes, you know, reading the article, you know, it's unbelievable tragedy to begin with. But then to find out again, it's a 55-year-old guy that was on heroin the night before and drugs and everything else, I mean, it's just a damn shame. It's just too much of that. What a waste.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

And just for anybody who may not have seen it, when Chris was coming out, he was pulling out. He had actually stopped at the red light at the corner of Johnson and Vets. When the light changed, Chris pulled out, and there was a minivan in the second turn lane who also pulled out. When they entered the intersection, the van that ran the red light T-boned him, and Chris was actually between the van that was moving and the minivan that was making the turn. The force of the impact, we know what happened to Chris, but the force of the impact moved that van onto the eastbound lanes of Vets Highway, put him onto the other side of Vets Highway, where he continued and struck three more vehicles. It was a very serious accident and never should have happened, obviously.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Director, again, thank you for being with us today. We continue to hear such great things, such promising things about this very important program, which, again, is not just important for us, not just important for our veterans and their families here, but we're very proud of the fact that we continue to serve as a model throughout the state and throughout the nation. Thank you.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I'm very proud of it, and I thank you again for all of your support because it really is, it's accomplishing great thing. And I sometimes have to make this argument that if we remove the moral and the ethical, the responsibility of the obligation that we should feel to provide this type of assistance, if you remove all of that and you simply apply the business model of it, these people are returning to work. They're purchasing homes. They're paying taxes. They're employed. They're sending children to school. They're doing all the things that are becoming active parts of our community, but they're coming off of social services. There are genuine benefits to the community well beyond taking care of our veterans.

Tom, with you, I just looked at you here and realized that I should thank -- the accident on Saturday morning was a very substantial scene. It was a large scene, and I was there for the whole thing, but I have to tell you that the Suffolk police officers that were on this thing, somebody should write a book because they did this -- they did their jobs so thoroughly and so meticulously, and they did it

in such a way that it was done properly so that there would be no question as to the efficacy of the arrest, the processing of this individual. Everything was done in such a way that they were looking well forward of putting bracelets on this guy and putting him in the back of a car. They thought this thing through, and they did an exceptional job, and my hat is off to them because they really did a fine job. And I will say that I spoke with both Commissioner Webber and Chief Burke this morning and told them the same thing. It really -- and to our community, that is very meaningful. They would have done their job as professionals regardless, but to our community, given that this was one of our own, so to speak, it meant a great deal, so thank you.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

All right. Thank you, everybody, for being with us today. There being no other business before the committee, we are adjourned.

*(\*The meeting was adjourned at 1:42 p.m. \*)*