

**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 November 12, 2013.

**Members Present:**

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

**Also In Attendance:**

Renee Ortiz - Chief Deputy Clerk  
George Nolan - Counsel to 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  
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director of Office for the Aging  
Michael Stolz - Suffolk County United Veterans  
Joe Cognitoire - VFW Post 6249  
Rick Brand - Newsday  
All Other Interested Parties

**Minutes Taken and Transcribed By:**

Gabrielle Severs - Court Stenographer

*(\*The meeting was called to order at 1:16 p.m. \*)*

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining us today. Welcome to the committee on Veterans and Seniors. Please rise and join the committee in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Anker.

*(\*Salutation\*)*

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

*(\*Moment of silence observed\*)*

**LEG. STERN:**

Okay. Welcome, everyone. Holly, I'm going to have you come on up and join us. We are, before presentations today, we do have some legislative items on the agenda. They are all --

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

They are all mine?

**LEG. STERN:**

They are all yours. So if anybody has any questions, I wanted to be able to have you in position to have you answer questions. But starting off, we will go to the agenda beginning with **IR 1820, Accepting and appropriating 100% reimbursable grant funds from the New York State Office for the Aging (County Executive)**. This is accepting \$18,000 to allow the agency to do its good work with Ombudsman Services, so I'll make a motion to approve and place on the consent calendar. Second by Legislator Anker. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? IR 1820 is **approved**. (VOTE: 3-0-0-2, Not Present: Muratore, Barraga)

**IR 1821, Accepting and appropriating 100% reimbursable new Federal grant funds from the New York State Office for the Aging for a Systems Integration Program (County Executive)**. This is accepting a \$64,000 grant for systems development regarding our health programs. Any questions? All good? Same motion, same second, same vote. IR 1821 is **approved**. (VOTE: 3-0-0-2, Not Present: Muratore, Barraga).

**IR 1869, Appropriating funds in connection with the purchase and replacement of Nutrition Vehicles for the Office for the Aging (CP 1749) (County Executive)**. I'll make a motion to approve. Second by Legislator Anker. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? IR 1869 is **approved**. (VOTE: 3-0-0-2, Not Present: Muratore, Barraga).

**IR 1900, Accepting and appropriating 100% Federal grant funds passed through the New York State Department of Health, Health Research Inc. to the Suffolk County Department of Health Services for the Falls Prevention for Older Adults Initiative (County Executive)**. This is a 100-percent federal grant passing through New York State for our Falls Prevention Program to aid community efforts in keeping our seniors safe and independent. Everybody good? Okay. I will make a motion to approve and place on the consent calendar. Second by Legislator Anker. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? IR 1900 is **approved**. (VOTE: 3-0-0-2, Not Present: Muratore, Barraga).

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

That's fabulous.

**LEG. STERN:**

All right. Very good. Thank you, Holly. I do not have any cards. Anybody? Do I have any cards? Seeing none, Director Ronayne.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Mr. Chairman, with your permission, I'd like to also invite Mr. Mike Stolz from Suffolk County United Veterans to join me at the table.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Of course. Welcome.

And while we just have a moment, please let me note for the record that Legislators Muratore and Barraga are not with us today. They have excused absences. Thank you.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Good afternoon. Firstly, I'd like to thank you for adjusting the calendar and moving the committee to this afternoon so that we were able to accommodate the programs that had been previously scheduled on Friday, all of which, I'm happy to say, were successful.

I have got a few things to report on. I'll be brief, not as brief as Holly, but I'll do what I can. A number of things that are happening in the community with regard to veterans that I'm actually very happy about right now -- I'm largely positive on where we are with most things. The first one that I'd like to discuss really more of a briefing, and that's that's why I had asked Mr. Stolz to join me, is the recently-announced SSFV program, Supportive Services For Veterans families. The program went live on October 1st, and, as I have reported here previously, Suffolk County, while attempts had been made in prior years of the program, I believe the program is now in it's third or fourth year, there have not previously been any successful applicants. This year, Suffolk County specifically has two successful grantors in place, and there are two additional who have the ability to extend their services into Suffolk should that become necessary.

Suffolk County United Veterans has partnered with EOC of Suffolk, and without stealing his thunder, so to speak, maybe Mike can explain a little bit about how it is that that partnership is going to enhance our ability to better serve the veterans in Suffolk County primarily but not exclusively with regard to housing and housing-related matters.

**MR. STOLZ:**

Thank you, Tom, and thank you, Mr. Stern and Ms. Anker. EOC is the lead applicant for the project that Suffolk County United Veterans is involved with. EOC is a long-standing, anti-poverty agency based in Patchogue and Central Islip, have had a range of anti-poverty/daycare/ emergency housing/intervention kinds of services, so they took the lead in making reposal for SSVF funds. Suffolk County United Veterans is one of the subcontractors with them along with Touro Law School, the Veterans Law Clinic, and the department of -- Suffolk County Department of Labor. Suffolk County United Veterans role in this, we just hired three veterans, one full time and two part time, to basically be thorough and exhaustive in finding veterans and veteran families who are homeless or at risk of being homeless. This is -- we have a long-standing, so to speak, expertise of Suffolk County United Veterans, which has been around since 1989, to be able to find men and women who have served, sometimes in the most desperate of situations and places, and to intervene through all sorts of strategies.

So we're pleased to say we're underway. We're doing our training. We've already, through a number of different outreach activities, already located a number of people who are eligible for this and we're very excited about this. I think as Tom said, you know, up to this point, we've done our best, you know, to find people, you know, most often vet-to-vet, you know, with the help of, you

know, other service organizations and such, and this gives us much more clout, much more resources to be able to find vets and vet families at risk.

**LEG. ANKER:**

I have a question. To me, I guess, it's probably obvious, but do you feel that there needs to be more long-term mental health facilities on Long Island to help our veterans?

**MR. STOLZ:**

When you say long-term, can you clarify that?

**LEG. ANKER:**

I guess whether it's mental health or drug addiction. I know on the drug addiction end of things, there seems to be a lack of long-term facilities for treatment. Do you see a need for that in regards to our veterans?

**MR. STOLZ:**

I have two other hats here that I'm bringing, so in addition to being the executive director of Suffolk County United Veterans, I'm the executive director of the Mental Health Association of Suffolk and the Clubhouse of Suffolk, both of which are devoted to community mental health issues. So a bias of mine is wherever we can we want to treat people and provide resources for people where they live and in their communities. So to say what's the need for long-term treatment, my inference from that is you're talking about inpatient care. "Long term" means, you know, our association, like with Pilgrim, you know, a year stay, two years of stay, and I'm not an expert to say what's the numbers, you know, for that. I can tell you from an advocacy standpoint, when we have veterans who need longer term, most often drug treatment, there are resources in the veterans community, sometimes not on Long Island, to be able to help people to get to that kind of care. It is not a high number and our first resources is using the V.A., Salvation Army, Seaford Center has been a tremendous, at least for the folks that we've been serving, Suffolk County United Veterans, some of the other OASAS-funded and licensed clinics that have certainly stepped to the plate. There's a sub-committee, you know, that I think comes to this legislature of the quality consortium that has specifically focused on veterans' substance abuse issues, So I think the community has stepped up. To give you a real specific answer of long-term bed needs, I'm not an expert on that.

**LEG. ANKER:**

I appreciate your knowledge and your advocacy, you know, for mental health because, again, it seems that, my personal opinion would be, we need to do more; you know, that's just the bottom line. When we closed Pilgrim Park and now the state is looking to close other facilities, it's not helping us, and the legislature -- I can speak for all of us -- really appreciate both Tom and your advocacy. It's very important that we at least provide that safety net for those in need.

**MR. STOLZ:**

Just one more comment. Under the Mental Health Association, myself, and my associate executive director have been very active in providing testimony to Senator Hannon and to other organizations and New York State office of Mental Health. Our major disturbance with that issue of closed facilities, of course, was the lack of advance notice, no substantiation for why is it that we're doing certain things. As a provider, we're pushed, all the time, around. Show me the data, show me the accountability, and all of a sudden, a decision is made where there's no data that supports why we're doing this, so that was awkward to say the least.

**LEG. ANKER:**

You're being kind, but thank you.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Obviously, we've just come through our Veterans Day Weekend. As always, there were many

events. Interestingly of note, one of the events that we conducted on Friday of last week, and that was the reason for the need to adjust the schedule for this committee, was we hosted our first veterans open house at the Dennison Building in Hauppauge. We invited a number of community providers, a number of community partners; and while I don't have numbers at this moment to provide to you, I can tell you by all accounts, the event was a success. We had a significant number of veterans come in. I, unfortunately, my schedule on Friday was very tight, and I wasn't able to spend a great deal of time there. But in the short time I was present, I observed two veterans specifically and very directly receiving assistance that they had been searching in the community for and were not able to engage until they attended our open house, so it was certainly a success. V.A. was in attendance. Our SSVF partners, including EOC and Suffolk County United Veterans were in attendance, and I will call it our "first annual" because there certainly will be more based on the success of the event on Friday.

Another event that occurred over the weekend, took place yesterday, was with another one of our very dear friends in the community, Long Island Cares. They launched their new veterans mobile unit is what they're referring to it, and it is a mobile food pantry that will enhance Long Island Cares' ability to outreach into the veterans community by attending events, participating in programs, but also by becoming more engaged, and they have been quite engaged thus far, but by becoming more engaged in working directly with veterans in need in the community, veterans who, perhaps, lack the ability to access transportation to get to Long Island Cares, to obtain supplies and groceries and so forth. They can now deliver these materials to the veteran at their home. One of the conversations that I have had with them, and they had done this in the past but we're hopeful that we'll be able to enhance this, is in situations similar to what Holly does with the Meals on Wheels and providing access and linkage to the community. When groceries are delivered to a veteran in need, it wouldn't be a matter of dropping the groceries on the porch and wishing them a good day. We are encouraging, and to the extent that we are able, we'll have somebody from my office on the van on the days when they're doing those home-call deliveries spend a few moments, have a cup of coffee with the veteran, engage them, make sure that there aren't underlying issues that might need our attention, make them aware of programs and services that potentially would be available for them but for their ability to leave the home. So I think that this enhancement of the program services at Long Island Cares is going to be very fruitful for us, and I'm delighted to report to you that it is at zero cost to us, so that's a good thing.

**LEG. STERN:**

Well, that is great to hear that it is not just going to be somebody delivering groceries maybe along with some written information and hoping that there's some kind of response, but your plan is to be much more proactive than that by having someone actually go out and make that engagement.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Absolutely. And in keeping with, as I have reported many, many times in the past here, veterans tend to engage other veterans differently and at a higher level than they do non-veterans. So my belief is that by having a veteran on the van, on the mobile unit when they access these veterans in their homes, it will allow us an ability to engage them in a way on a level that they may not have previously been able to through others who might have been assisting them at their home.

On the same note of veterans in the community needing assistance, needing our services, and the importance of providing that outreach, I'll just report briefly on the fact that we have had several veterans take their own lives again in the past eight or so weeks. The numbers are dramatically lower than they were at this time last year. We continue to hope and believe that that was just an anomalous period that we haven't really defined why there was such a high number, but the fact remains that we have had several more in the past couple months. We're doing everything that we can think of to be in the community, to be proactive, and, obviously, working with Mike in his capacity with the Mental Health Association and the agencies that we typically partner with. But it's

an important reminder that we need to remain engaged. We need to remain connected to this community.

And I was having a conversation with someone earlier this morning. The conversation came around to the importance in what we do, to never default to the belief that we have another day to get to this issue, we can return a call tomorrow. These are life-and-death issues with these people, and we're very fortunate in Suffolk County that we have a very talented, very skilled, very well-trained core of people working with us on this problem. But it continues to be a serious problem, and we continue to work very hard.

Perfect segue into the Joseph Dwyer Peer Support Program. Mike and I recently attended a conference in Albany that consisted of all the 11 counties in the state who participate in the Dwyer Program, and I can tell you that while the conference was informative and educational, and I think it's also very valuable and important that aside from the content of these types of conferences and meetings, the networking or the social component where we get to engage directly face-to-face with our counterparts in other parts of the state is extremely valuable. I can tell you that Suffolk County was very well-received, very well-regarded, and, once again, I think it's safe to say that most of the other 10 counties were looking to Suffolk County for continued guidance and continued cooperation to support their efforts in their counties. We continue to enjoy a great deal of success in the county, and that is attributable to nothing other than the wonderful team that we've been able to compile. Their success, the work has been effective, but there is so much more to be done, and I think Mike may or may not have something to add on the Dwyer Program. But Mike's role in the Dwyer program has been beyond integral. The role of Suffolk County United Veterans in their partnership with us as the contract agency to Suffolk administering the daily operations of the program have been critically important. Mike's skills, Mike's background, and Mike's professional abilities have been invaluable. So if you have anything you'd like to add on Dwyer.

**MR. STOLZ:**

After you have thoroughly embarrassed me. So to get to some specifics, I think we have nine active groups going on right now that have anywhere from three to a dozen participants. We're doing a number of outreach events where basically some of our staff, our -- there are a tremendous number of veterans events where organizations have tables and such, and especially through the Veterans Day week, so we get to meet a lot of people. And I think we have anywhere from seven to eight other groups including college campuses, town halls, a number of different venues that we're developing more groups. One of the challenges of this is as you meet more people, more veterans and veteran families, you realize the uniqueness of the needs, and I think the challenge for the Dwyer Project is sometimes that we have taken on so many issues under this funding that it's driven by tremendous passion and the needs, but it is a challenge.

**LEG. STERN:**

Do you have any feel for, in the coming year, how many more veterans and/or family members you would look to add or hope to add? What do you see coming up for the program within the next calendar year?

**MR. STOLZ:**

Well, understand the calendar year pretty much starts to exhaust the funding that's available for us. We have funding, essentially, I just found out. It goes to June of 2015, although with the demand of services and the number of people, groups that we're putting on and activities, I see us exhausting the dollars, these 100-percent state dollars by the end of 2014. So we're in a position right now where, actually, at this meeting that Tom explained, we're trying to rally all 12 counties to work together on a sustainability plan and look to see what other kinds of resources, private and public, that we might be able to look for to be able to extend the program. So I'm not ducking your question, but to give you the overview on it, that's clearly a major issue within that time and understanding that potential end of funding. Could we get 12 to 15 active vibrant groups going on?

Absolutely. So the math of three to a dozen people to every group plus you have kind of a caseload of people, so the coordinator, Tim, you know, will reach out to people. Tom's office will get a call, Tom's staff will hand-off to Tim; Tim will go visit somebody, go visit a family member, go visit a veteran at risk and work individually with that veteran until that veteran will connect with a support group, so you always have a number of those going on too. So I can't give you a specific -- I mean, I probably could give you a specific number target number, but it would a little bit be amorphous.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

And I think, to continue on Mike's point, while the intent is to, obviously, continue and to expand to the extent that we are able in the community, we do recognize now that because of financial limitations, some of the expansion will have to be monitored much more closely than we had previously expected to have to. Specifically with the development of the family member groups, we've been working with LIJ. We have a site plan; we have a team, and we're hopeful to launch. The number has been adjusted or the date has been adjusted a couple times, but in the coming weeks, we're hopeful that we'll be launching this family group to begin that process. That element of the program, we had discussed it earlier on in the program as something that we had hoped that we had hoped to have been able to incorporate. As we have evolved and the program has developed, it has become increasingly clear of the importance of this type of inclusion to be able to include the families. Quite honestly, my belief is that it is going to result in a need for further development, further expansion and growth of the program at which point we're going to have to have a serious discussion about exactly how to accomplish that given the funding limitations. The state has been wonderful. They've been generous, and we've been able to get to where we are now but as has happened occasionally in the past in Suffolk County, I think it's fair to say that this program is on a path to becoming a victim of its own success.

**LEG. ANKER:**

I have a question. You know, you mentioned -- and I read it, I think, in the paper -- that suicide rates were down 22 percent, something -- are you familiar with that?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I think, if I read the same report, it was not 22 percent. It was the number has now been adjusted downward to 22 veterans per day are taking their own lives. The number was adjusted downward from 24. We can also have an offline discussion about my confidence in the accuracy of that report.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Right. And so my question again -- I guess this is for a longer conversation -- is that, you know, I'm sure there's emotional issues that our vets are dealing with when they come back. My dad is a disabled vet; I understand. But, you know, is there -- we have a terrible epidemic of drug addiction, and in my mind -- well, what do doctors do when people are in pain; they give them OxyContin or Vicodin, and then what happens when you become addicted? It's this awful situation. Is there anything more that we can do with that, or do you feel that could be the reason why the rates are coming down, because we're addressing this? And if so, can we do more to address the issue with drug addiction and our vets?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I think honestly one of the most important things that we can do is education and information. We need to be able to get the information out into the community. Despite all our best efforts at any level of government, our outreach is only going to be so effective. We're only going to be able to make contact directly with X number of the community. The information and the education is critically important, and, you know, if you'll put two people in a room, we'll come out and speak to them. We're very happy to go out and provide information to provide numbers and statistics. That, I think, is key, and there's really very little cost associated with that. It's a matter of having the support of local media, and, you know, quite honestly, everybody in this room is an ambassador.

When we're out in public, when we're working with our constituents, it's important for us to remember and to share this message and let folks know that there are places that they can communicate to. We've had good success with the Facebook page, the social media, e-mail, tweeting. The younger generation of veterans are very reliant on the social media, and in a way that's been a blessing to us because we can access social media and provide information to a great many people with very little effort. We've become pretty good at that.

We continue to evolve, and we're learning as we go, but I just truly believe that getting into the community -- and it's not about necessarily identifying the military veteran community because they exist among us in every walk of life on Long Island. Going into the schools, speaking to the high schools, when we speak to the high school kids and we speak to their parents, it is their siblings, it is their parent, it is their grandparent who is that veteran that we're trying to reach. The same holds true to town hall meetings and, you know, community fairs and different types of events. We try to be present at as many of these programs as we become aware of, but that really is the key: getting that information into the hands of the people who can continue to carry it out and help us get that message across.

**LEG. ANKER:**

And what's interesting, from what I understand is that, we have no military base here on Long Island; is that true?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

We have no significant active duty presence. We do have active duty troops. The 106 Rescue Wing in Westhampton. The complement out there is about 1500. The Marine Corps. depot in Garden City. We have a small international guard detachment at MacArthur Airport in Ronkonkoma. We have a very large National Guard facility in Farmingdale. In fact, I'm told it is the largest National Guard facility in the world. They operate at about 1600 people when they're fully operational.

To your point, I think, earlier, with regard to the question of the numbers declining and coming down, I think there are a couple factors that contribute to that, one of which is the individuals who are being tracked. We continue to be in a phase of downward mobility in the military. The numbers of forces serving and the numbers of forces deploying have been reduced. The active duty folks are largely where the tracking occurs as the force reductions continue and the numbers of active duty people serving decline. There are fewer people being tracked. Once a veteran leaves active duty, there's nothing that compels us to continue to be a part of any DOD or V.A. tracking, so if a veteran leaves military service and does not engage V.A. or does not continue to be enrolled or active in some type of program, their deaths will go -- I hate to say it this way, but the death will go unnoticed in terms of statistics with regard to reporting on veteran suicide. As the number of veterans who are being created by the downward -- the force reduction, there are fewer people being tracked, and as a result of that, I think that speaks partly to the decline in the numbers. My personal belief, my professional estimation is that as the number of veterans increases, it's only reasonable to believe that that number will, as well, increase, but on paper, at least, we have not yet seen that.

**MR. STOLZ:**

If I could respond to a couple things. You know, I'm a mental health person, so to distinguish between suicide and drug addiction, they're like two topics for me. Yes, there's times where they cross together, but Tom, I think, hit on all the talking points with respect to suicide and it's very difficult to document. The numbers are always difficult to really pinpoint. But I will just point toward a couple things. Office of Mental Health recently came out with a really compelling report on how to achieve a target of zero suicides, and in there, it really talks about the number of points that Tom hit on about early intervention about schools discussing sadness, social media, all those kinds

of things to be able to have a target. And Tom is exactly right: When it comes to veterans taking their own lives, the count is always an undercount, unfortunately. With respect to drug addiction, this legislature, this county, and the state has been well ahead of the curve of, kind of, the things that we read in national media with respect to, particularly, like the I-STOP legislation. The public education, I think, the mental health association is in a number of schools, my colleague, Jeff Reynolds with LICADD, has, you know, been out there locally and nationally around, you know, public education and warnings of -- I think there's a successor drug to oxycodone that's far more potent and toxic that at least allows prescribers to think twice about it and addiction agencies and mental health agencies to kind of be prepared for what this experience might be, what the spikes might be. So I think we're well ahead. We're certainly not in a county of naivety here. We're well out ahead, but there are forces that happen on a federal level; you know, allowance of some of these meds, controls, you know, communication that goes to prescribers that, you know, are difficult and are challenging for all of us, but I think this county, this legislature has been on top of these issues, and we're doing the right thing in that way.

**LEG. STERN:**

Tom.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I'll end on a high note. I attended a lunch on Friday of last week, and joining me at the lunch were Judge C. Randall Hinrichs and Judge Peter Mayer. We were able -- we were very pleased to announce at this luncheon that after a great deal of work and a great deal of effort on the part of many people, the veterans court will be expanding. The veterans court will launch on November 20 in the Town of Southampton courts. Judge Andrea Schiavoni will be the presiding judge on that court. I've had a couple of wonderful discussions with the judge; in fact, I will be attending court on the first day, on November 20. But what is important to be aware of with the expansion of the court into the Town of Southampton is for a number of reasons: the population, the seasonal populations and so forth. There was as question as to whether or not there was a need for a court given the rather small number of year-round residents in the Town of Southampton, so what was done is the court, the veterans court will encompass all five eastern towns. All five eastern towns with veterans who are referred to the court will be returnable to the Southampton court, and there are a lot of accolades to go around.

I know that Legislator Stern had spoken with some of the judges during the development of this. I know District Attorney Spota was involved as was the county executive's office, my office to a very, very small extent, but this is significant in many ways on many levels, not the least of which -- and I think I'll close with this: To my knowledge, and I'm pretty well-versed on this issue, this will now make, in addition to our other accomplishments, Suffolk County, New York will now be the only county in the United States to host two veterans courts. I think that sends a strong message relative to our commitment to standing behind and serving and working with our veteran population, honoring those who served in any way that we can.

**MR. STOLZ:**

Can I have 30 seconds?

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Sure.

**MR. STOLZ:**

So just to make a statement here, I have been now involved with the veterans issues for about four years since Clubhouse of Suffolk merged with Suffolk County United Veterans. I have come to know this man on my right especially over the past year. I'm sorry, Tom; you're going to get this. You know, and most recently, what became very clear is when we attended this county -- this

meeting of 12 counties through the Dwyer Project upstate where there were a number of other veterans service agencies heads there. This is an incredible man, and we have an incredible gift in how he has championed the cause of veterans and veterans families here, and been able to draw and attract resources, information. This is an unbelievable person. He is widely loved and respected all around this county and all around the state. He is the go-to man on every issue that intersects veterans. You know, I'm telling you what I know, you particularly already know, but we have quite a gift here. This has been an honor to serve under him and watch him in action.

**LEG. STERN:**

Thank you for sharing those kinds words. We certainly know how special the director is, and and there is no better ambassador.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Very kind. Thank you.

**LEG. STERN:**

And he looked real good on News 12 yesterday as well.

*(\*Laughter\*)*

Director, as always, thank you. Mike, thank you.

**LEG. ANKER:**

All right. We have some of my constituents from my area. We have Mark Baisch. He's the vice president of Long Island Home Builders Care Developer Corp. and he is going to discuss some of the buildings, the homes that they're building for our returning vets. Joe, you want to come up also? Joe Cognitore. He's the commander of VFW Post 6249 in Rocky Point, and Joe also has been involved in helping our vets find homes. And, you know, again, I think that's what's so important is that we support those who have supported us and have preserved our freedom. So Mark, would you like to start out and just give us a little bit of information of how the program got started and how you guys are doing.

**MR. BAISCH:**

Good afternoon. I'm Mark Baisch. I'm here as the vice president of Long Island Home Builders Care Development Corporation. In my real life, I am the owner of Landmark Properties, which is a single-family homebuilder with a headquarters in Rocky Point, in Sarah's district. Long Island Home Builders Care Development Corporation was founded in 2011 as a charitable arm of the Long Island Builders Institute with a specific mission to build new homes for returning veterans. The first home groundbreaking was on Memorial Day of 2011 and was delivered on Veterans Day of 2011 to a three-tour, purple-heart veteran, Army Staff Sergeant Omar Domineech (ph) on a lot in Sound Beach, which I donated after having become acquainted with Joe Cognitore from the VFW who convinced me that there was this need of housing for returning veterans. I designed and built the house and my fellow members at LIB generously donated a lot of services and materials, and we were able to build this first home and get it to Omar on Veterans Day 2011.

The second home was constructed and delivered in 2012 to Marine Sergeant Ryan Donnelly who also served three tours in Iraq and Afghanistan and lost his leg in an IED explosion in 2005 and received a purple heart. This home was built on a lot in Lake Ronkonkoma on land given by the Town of Brookhaven who received it from you through the Suffolk County 72h Affordable Housing Program.

The third through the eighth homes are to be delivered on January 19 of this year to six veteran families on a six-lot subdivision called Veterans Way just off Motor Parkway in the Village of Islandia on land donated by CA, which I still remember as Computer Associates. All the homes to date have

been three-bedroom, two-bath ranch homes, whose combined V.A. mortgage insurance and taxes have ranged from 1100 to \$1400 a month. And by year's end, Long Island Home Builders Care Development Corporation will have delivered \$3 million worth of homes for less than half that amount and are approximately a \$1,450,000, and we've insured that eight veteran families will be able to stay on Long Island in Suffolk County and raise their families.

The program's future looks bright, as we have just received another 72h parcel in Centereach as well as two other parcels in East Patchogue, and there are several other prospective parcels on the horizon.

I would like to take time to personally thank, as well as thank on behalf of Long Island Home Builders Care Development Corporation, the County of Suffolk, and your 72h program, as you have been a big part of all of this, as has the Suffolk County Department of Health Services and the Suffolk County Water Authority. Your collective actions go a long way to ensure our veterans will be able to stay on Long Island and raise their families. Thank you.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Well, thank you so much, and again, it's just wonderful to hear that there are organizations, groups, large groups looking out for our vets. And, Joe, I know you had helped also with this project. You want to give us a little information about what you guys are doing at the VFW in Rocky Point?

**MR. COGNITORE:**

Joe Cognitoire, commander, VFW Post 6249, Rocky Point, National Legislative Committee and the state chair for Legislative Committee for the VFW. We as veterans always look out to help other veterans, their families, and also others in our community, not only veterans. Three years ago when I met Mark, a discussion was had and they talked about renovating homes for returning vets, especially those that came back with disabilities. It was my recommendation at that time that -- well, they noted that it was expensive to do so. At that time, I mentioned a possibility that we don't renovate their homes; we give them a home or help them into a home, and that did a few things. Number one, it made them independent. Just for argument's sake, if they were home this past Sunday watching a few games or doing anything, they invited someone over to their existing house with their parents where they're living, it's not the same. So maybe their parents could live with them for a couple of months and get him acquainted with the facility, and he could be on his own eventually.

Mark took that charge a year later. When he came to us, we were flabbergasted, and I can't thank Mark Baisch enough for what he has done behind the scenes, in front of the scenes, and everywhere else in the universe. He and the organization, Long Island Home Builders Cares, has come to the table, and I want to thank all in Suffolk County for their help and their continued support and help for the veterans, so it's been a monumental success.

My personal job is to chair the committee that reviews these veterans, and it's not easy because everyone that we reviewed has an opportunity to be in those homes, and it's not an easy decision. We based it on a numerical value, where we sit with five other veterans, past commander, state commander, DAV president of 192, and we interview them, and we put a quantitative number to all the questions that we ask. And everyone scores, of course, but it's not easy to just say that this top six are the winners. If you read their histories and bios, you'll see that some of these that we're placing now are living in their mother's house or she's living her mother's house or their parents' home and they see each other here and there, or their goods are somewhere else, the furniture is here, and their kids are brought back and forth to different families, so they could never have this opportunity. And it's not a handout; it's a hands-up for them. They could never have this opportunity, and they've stated that if it wasn't for Home Builders Cares and Mark, they would never ever be able to afford any homes on the Island. They couldn't afford their rent. So with his

helping hand, I again want to thank Mark, and any assistance that anyone here today can give Mark today and in the future would much be appreciated by all the veterans in the community, and I thank you very much.

**LEG. ANKER:**

We thank you very much. Mark, if you could just mention some of those people that are involved. Do you have any of those names that we could just recognize?

**MR. BAISCH:**

Well, the LIB Board of Directors -- excuse me; the Long Island Home Builders Care Board of Directors is made up of people who are extremely active in in the entire process of building the homes. In fact, in this case, we had to build a whole subdivision. We had to put the roads in, the water, electric, gas, the whole nine yards, on the property that CA gave us. So the Board consists of the chairman, who is Edgar Goodale, who also owns Riverhead Building Supply, who is a key player. The president is Tom Datre, who, I mean, most people know in the building community for the last 30 or 40 years. Tom has been extremely active, and Tom has also been very hands-on onsite with respect to day-to-day activities in constructing the homes. I'm the vice president. My role has been more of -- kind of the back office guy. I met with all the veterans. I kind of take care of all the choices and, kind of, their own personal issues. We have Lois Fricke, who really is the backbone of LIB. She's extremely involved. She probably, on a day-to-day basis, does more than all the rest of us put together in ensuring that this program goes forward. We have several, what we call, associate members who are members. We have a large concrete member, Danic Concrete; my personal electrician, STS Electric, who has wired eight homes now for free. We have the Zorn family; Zorn Industries is heavily involved. They have done all the excavation work for us on all these homes for basically gratis, all eight homes. We have Jay Ratto Landscaping. He's a board member. He has done all the landscaping and has been able to procure materials for the landscaping, basically from Bissett for all these homes. So all our board members are key players in actually building these homes. We don't have anybody sitting on the board that is not active on a day-to-day basis in the building of these homes, so it's a great group of people, and it's a group of people that are all like-minded. There's no discussion other than, "Let's get these homes delivered to these veterans."

**LEG. ANKER:**

Well, again, I just want to thank you so much for all the work that you've done. It makes everybody feel so good to know that you're there looking out for our vets, you know, and I hope people appreciate that, and I always say, you know, shop local, buy local. Well, also shop and buy those people that you know are doing good for your community. So I want to thank you again.

**LEG. STERN:**

First of all, thank you. Thank you for your service and for your commitment for this very important effort. It's great to see, and great job, Mark. When we have the opportunity to take a look at 72h as a program and particular properties, and we make those approvals, and we send them to the town, we are always hoping that there's going to be a good utilization of those properties. There could be no better utilization than what we're seeing here. So congratulations and thank you, most importantly, and very gratifying. Great job.

Anybody else? Okay. Gentlemen, thank you, and thank you, everyone, for being with us at committee today. We are adjourned.

*(\*The meeting was adjourned at 2:05 p.m. \*)*