

**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 March 10, 2014, at 12:30 p.m.

**Members Present:**

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

**Also In Attendance:**

Legislator DuWayne Gregory - Presiding Officer/District 15  
Renee Ortiz - Chief Deputy Clerk  
Tom Vaughn/John Morafino - County Executive's Office  
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veterans Services  
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director of Office for the Aging  
Bill Schilling - Aide to Legislator Calarco  
Robert Martinez - Aide to Legislator Muratore  
Pam Donovan - Aide to Legislator Anker  
Catherine Stark - Aide to Legislator Krupski  
Michael Pitcher - Aide to Presiding Officer Gregory  
Michael Stoltz - SC United Veterans  
John Schultz - PC for Joseph Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program  
Melissa Pandolf - Veterans Affairs  
Jeremy Pandolf - Veterans Affairs  
Zachary Pandolf - Veterans Affairs  
Kasanya Pandolf - Veterans Affairs  
Julia Pandolf - Veterans Affairs  
All Other Interested Parties

**Minutes Taken and Transcribed By:**

Kevin Gruebel, Court Reporter

*(\*The meeting was called to order at 12:37 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 Muratore.

*(\*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\*)*

Okay. Director Ronayne.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, members. Thank you again as always for the invitation to be here before you today. I have a number of things to report on, but I think in the interest of really that my view of today's Committee is in the spirit of the recognition of Month of the Military Child. I just -- I'm so delighted that we were able to coordinate with the Pandolf family and have them be able to join us here today.

I can tell you, full disclosure, I've known Melissa Pandolf for some number of years. I actually know her father fairly well, who was an active member of the Marine Corps League. Melissa herself is a 21-year still-serving member of the International Guard serving in the Air Force and has done an exemplary job. I believe she had about ten years of service right here in Suffolk County at the 106 Air Rescue wing in Westhampton. She continues to serve. I believe right now she's assigned to McGuire Air Force base or McGuire Joint Base and has a very active and successful military career. Remarkably, at least in my opinion, is the fact that in the midst of having a busy and active military career she also has been able to -- and I won't fill in many of the blanks here; I think I'll leave that for Melissa. But over the course of her military career she has also got a very full life working hard as a wife and a mom to four delightful children, and I think that's a good place for me to stop telling my version of the story, and we'll hear it right from the source, so to speak.

I think any of you who are not familiar with the story of what Melissa and her husband, Doug Pandolf, have accomplished -- and again, to the point of Month of the Military Child, in growing their family of four beautiful children, it's really an extraordinary tale; so much so that a book has been written about it, but I would invite -- if you would indulge me, I would invite Melissa Pandolf to join me at the table and maybe begin to share some of her story as we learn a little bit about them and will then be introduced to the children.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Hello.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Welcome, welcome and thank you for being here and of course thank you for your service to our nation.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Thank you. So, as Tom said, I've known him for a really long time. We met because I'm a member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 1469 in Huntington. I currently live in Patchogue though now, but I've been serving in the military for 21 years. I have almost eight years regular active-duty Air Force, and now I'm still serving in the International Guard, and with all that going on, I also -- my

husband and I, when we got married, we adopted our four children, and they're adopted from Russia. They're four biological siblings. We adopted three at once, and then we found out a fourth one was born, so we went back and got Jeremy, but raising kids in the military, the biggest thing that I really want everybody to understand is -- especially on Long Island because we don't have an active-duty full base here, a lot of our resources aren't here that traditionally when you're closer to an active-duty base that you would have.

So, my biggest concern with the kids is when I do go away - I was away for six weeks in September, October. I'm leaving for four months this coming October - is having the schools understand more about how children feel when their parent leaves 'cause a lot of the teachers on Long Island, they're great teachers, and we don't have any complaints, but I think the biggest thing is for them to understand, hey, this one's sad because their mom's away and to maybe have more of an understanding about that. So, that's what, I guess, my takeaway would be, you know, time being short and everything, but just to have the school districts understand what children go through when their parents have to leave especially when it's mom 'cause I take care of everything at home. So, when I leave, dad's in charge. You know, we have a binder. It's like if anything happens get this pink binder out of the house, it has everything you need to know in it. It's not like when dad leaves, typically mom's left at home, you know. We're actually reverse. My husband's never been in the military, so it's a bit of a role reversal for us, but I do have my children here. I'd like -- they each prepared a little few sentences about what it's like now growing up as a military family. So, if I could introduce them. I have Jeremy. Come on.

This is Jeremy. He's my youngest. He's nine, and he's very shy. Two of my children have special needs, so that's another thing being in the military that teachers need to understand, not only does mom leave, it's -- it enhances some of their things, right? Go ahead, you can read.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Welcome, welcome, Jeremy.

**JEREMY PANDOLF:**

Hi. I like when my mom goes in the military. When my mom goes I feel sad for her at school. I do good in school. When we go to the movies the guy gives my mom a military discount. I like when my mom takes me to see the airplanes.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Good job. And then we have Zachary.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

That is a great job, Jeremy.

*(\*Applause\*)*

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Zachary's ten.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Welcome, Zachary.

**ZACHARY PANDOLF:**

Hi. I think that my mom is cool because she is in the military. Sometimes when she is away I want us to go places. I miss her when she goes away. When she comes home, I'm happy. When she goes away we have to make sure that the house is clean. My dad does a good job when mommy is away.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Great job.

*(\*Applause\*)*

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Then we have Kasenya, my 12-year-old that thinks she's 16.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

That's her job.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Welcome, Kasenya.

**KASENYA PANDOLF:**

When my mom is away I am very sad to see her leave. When she is gone, my dad and sis -- me, my dad and sister have to clean the house and make sure everything is okay. It is especially very crazy with my two brothers. So, I make sure that they aren't making any damage or wrecking the house.

My dad especially works. He works really hard to make sure that we have food on the table and clothes on our backs when our mom is gone -- when our mom is gone. My mom works very hard in the military, and sometimes when she leaves for weeks or months my aunt, Christine, or grandma or grandpa will come to take care of us and help us while my dad is at work. Since my mom is in the military she could be a little hard on us, but I know she loves us, and I love her. I like that she's in the military, but I don't like when she leaves. I am super proud of her and how far she has come. I am proud to call her mom.

When your mom and dad are in the military, there's a good reason because you get a military discount when you go to stores. There's also some sad reasons: You'll miss them, sometimes you'll have to do all the household chores. For all of the military families, it is okay when they leave because they will always be reasons where you want them to leave to take a break from them and some sad reasons, 'cause you'll miss them. It is okay if people don't understand because there is always someone who will understand what you are going through and all the motions that you are feeling. It is hard, but the best thing about it is that you can go to the Air Force base and see all the aircrafts and helicopters.

*(\*Applause\*)*

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Last is Julia. She's 14. She's the mom when I'm not around.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Hello, Julia.

**JULIA PANDOLF:**

Hi. When mom goes away, she usually goes away for three days or even months. That means I have to work harder at home, help my siblings with homework and do good in school. This gets really frustrating though because I miss the way she helps us with schoolwork, does laundry and kisses us goodnight every day. My dad is great at doing this stuff, but my mom is way better.

My family outside the home is also very supportive. They help us do things in the house and come

over to hang out every week. In school, my teachers really don't understand that I get upset. There might be two teachers that think they understand, but they just don't make me feel any better. There are also kids in my grade that don't get why I'm upset all the time when my mom leaves to go to the Air Force. If I could find a way to explain to them that I just don't like when my mom leaves, but at the same time I know she's doing a good thing. I would try to explain, but they just don't understand and change the subject like they knew exactly what I just said.

So, to tell you the truth, I do understand that my mom goes to the Air Force to serve her country, but I do feel upset that I can't see her for a while. Hey, at least I get a break from her driving me crazy all the time.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Good job.

*(\*Applause\*)*

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

The -- I think the importance at least to me when I look at a family like Melissa and Doug and the children, in the context of not only being a family but being a family where the process that they went through in order to build this family, the logistics, the expenses, the great personal sacrifice we're involved in building this adopted family literally from around the world is really extraordinary, and while I think that this is an exceptional family I think they speak very well to the issue of the military mindset when it comes to service and commitment and sacrifice and the fact that they have been able to over the years to really do without in many ways, to work much harder than certainly was required of them. They could certainly have done things differently and not have had to have, you know, endure some of the challenges that they have over the years, but they went in with a -- when they went into this endeavor with both eyes open, and I just think it's truly commendable that they have worked so hard.

What I -- what I feel is absent and why I'm so delighted that they were able to be here with us today and go on the record is that this family while they are maybe unique in some of the elements of how they developed and became this wonderful family, they're not so unique in that they are our military service members. They are our guardsmen and our reservists, but they're our neighbors. These are our citizen soldiers. These are the folks who live next door to us. They are the -- our schoolteachers, our police officers. You know, from every -- everybody that we encounter in the course of our daily lives, anybody on the other side of our encounter could be a guardsman or a reservist who is doing extraordinary things, and we as a community, as hard as we work within government really do not understand, I think, the full scope of what it is that these families contribute to us, to the fabric of Suffolk County and what they allow us to be, how much better we are for having them amongst us. And again, I just thank you for the opportunity to have them here with us today.

I feel it's, you know, just a golden opportunity. The fact that it is the Month of the Military Child, I think, was ideal for today's presentation, and I guess if I would leave this with anything, with any thought, it would be: We -- I'm very proud, I'm very thankful that I have the staff that I do who work as hard as they do and they are as successful as they are to make our office what it is. I feel that, you know -- and Melissa certainly hit it right on the head. She hit the nail on the head when she said that our schools, our educators and certainly the children, the contemporaries, the peers of these children. When many of us were growing up it was a very different experience in school, and most of us had many other children on our grade level that we could, you know, align ourselves with and other children who understood our experiences and the uniqueness of what our lives were relative to those of our nonmilitary families. We don't really have that anymore, and as much as it can be a challenge for the adults and for the parents to navigate that, I think the real shortcoming is

for the children because there's not a true understanding within the schools of what exactly it is that these children are experiencing, and obviously education is the key to that awareness. We over the years have tried various -- we've made various attempts with limited success, but I suppose I would just leave you with that thought, that if there were a way that we could collectively expand the understanding of what it is to have military children in the class on a grade level in a school building, I think we could do a tremendous service to these -- to these families by better understanding them. So, thank you.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

I'm sure my colleagues are going to have questions, but my question to you, first of all, is: Where can we get copies of the book?

**MS. PANDOLF:**

It's on Amazon, Amazon.com.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good. Well, Congratulations.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Congratulations. The -- we talk about all the time and we find that here on Long Island because we don't have a centrally-located military base that there are tremendous challenges for -- whether it's active service or those that serve in the Guard or the Reserves, that it's -- here on Long Island, it's not like it is maybe in other parts of the country and plenty of challenges that go along with that.

So, I'm wondering what type of -- obviously they are quite limited, but I'd be interested to know from your perspective what opportunities are there if any to bring together children in military families to speak with each other, to work with each other, to participate in events with each other especially during times where a parent might be overseas serving on active military service.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

I actually don't know of any functions that do go on. I know I personally -- from my kids' schools, I go into their schools in uniform, and I have a book that's called *I Pledge Allegiance*, and it breaks it down to child-friendly terms as to what saying the Pledge of Allegiance actually means. So, I try to go out and do things to bring awareness that, hey, I'm not just their mom, you know, there's a whole world out here of other military people. I think they should do more, like, assemblies like that or -- just kids in their own school districts, you know, within their districts just try to do something because I don't really know -- I mean, there's the Army Reserves, the Guard, the Air Force Reserves. We're all here on Long Island, but I don't know of any collective gathering that has gone on, you know.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

And we have here in Suffolk County the Month of the Military Child, and we're very proud of what we do during that month and hopefully all year round to recognize family members of our service members. And I know that Director Ronayne and many of my colleagues share the frustration, particularly the Director because there is nobody that works harder at making an outreach effort than Director Ronayne and his outstanding staff when it comes to providing support and the services that our service members and their families need. And so, when there are events, we find that with

all of the outreach efforts that we make still there is not the type of participation that we would all like to be able to see and provide for just because there is that scattering of families throughout, and there is no centrally located -- whether it's an organization or location. Any ideas on what us at the County level of government or any level of government can and should be doing to make a stronger, more concerted and maybe more coordinated effort to make sure that our military families know and have the opportunity to participate in any of the things that we're able to offer.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

I don't know that I've seen it before. I know when I was stationed at Westhampton there's a family-readiness group, and they're great because when you're working at the base you hear about things, but outside the base you don't. So, maybe if it was just put on the radio. More, like, almost, like, TV commercials, you know, News 12 because I know I haven't -- I'm always on Long Island. I live here, you know, and I never see advertisements for these events on things like News 12 or, you know, FiOS1, like, local channels and the local newspaper. I personally never came across it, and I'm more likely to go to them if I would see, you know, them in that forum because unless I go to the VFW or my dad tells me from the Marine Corps League that there's something going on, it doesn't seem to trickle down to the everyday person that's not maybe a member of a structured organization.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Yeah. Legislator Anker.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Thank you so much for, you know, your energy and everything that you do. You know, I'm a mother of three, and I'm also a daughter of a disabled vet, and I remember growing up in central Florida, you know, we'd take a ride over to MacDill Air Force Base where there's substantial discounts for military. Do we have that here on Long Island? Is there -- there's no active base, but are there places you can go that support military families with that?

**MS. PANDOLF:**

As far as military discounts and stuff, you pretty much just have to ask. I know Island 16, Island 16 has a great military program. My kids always -- they tell you, "We can go to the movies because it's cheap enough with the military," but there are, you know, Home Depot, Lowe's, some of the big stores, but typically there's no sign up that offers a military discount --

**LEG. ANKER:**

Right.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

-- other than Payless Shoes.

**LEG. ANKER:**

No, I know. My office, we worked with Tom's office to create a veterans discount list like we have a seniors discount list, and unless you ask you don't get the discount.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Right.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Which is a little frustrating, but I will let you know I got together with my dad last year and my sisters and their families, and there's probably maybe about 15 or 16 of us. We went to the Museum of Natural History, and we got in for free. So, you know, make sure, but you have to ask, and you have to have your military pass.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Right.

**LEG. ANKER:**

So, as Chair of the Education Committee, I would be happy to work with you. We do have a list of all the Superintendents in Suffolk County. We have a list of all the Principals, and we also have a list of all the PTAs and PTOs. So, if there is something that we can work to maybe create a -- some type of form or some type of awareness sheet.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Okay.

**LEG. ANKER:**

I think that would be great.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

That sounds great.

**LEG. ANKER:**

All right. So, we'll get you my contact information. Thank you.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislature Barraga.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Thank you and thank you very much for coming. Let me ask you a question. You had mentioned that at sometime in the future you're going on a four-month deployment. Without saying where you're going or anything like that, is there any --

**MS. PANDOLF:**

It's United States in Texas.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Yeah. I was going to ask: During that four-month period, is there any time where you might be able to get some leave to get back home? How does that process work with you?

**MS. PANDOLF:**

It's a training forum that I'm going to in San Antonio. So, I'll actually fly them down for Thanksgiving, and then I'll fly home for Christmas, but other than that it's just the two holidays that I'll get the break for.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Two holidays. When does it start?

**MS. PANDOLF:**

I think I have to leave October 15th, around there, and then I come back January 30th or 29th, somewhere around there.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

So, you get the opportunity of coming home twice during the holidays?

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Well, I'll fly them to Texas so that they can see Texas.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Oh, I see.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

And then I'll come home for Christmas.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Yeah. When I was sitting here before when your oldest daughter came in I thought it was my granddaughter. I have seven grandchildren.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Okay.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

And the two oldest ones are twins, and the two oldest ones are 15 years of age, and your oldest daughter looks just like my granddaughter from a -- I -- same, same -- I have a picture of her if you're ever -- if you're interested in coming up, but you two could be almost twins, you know, but congratulations to you and your family and thank you very much for coming this morning.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Thank you. It's a pleasure being here.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Krupski.

**LEG. KRUPSKI:**

Thank you. It just -- you know, congratulations. I heard your story the other night, and two hours of ceremony, and these were four of the most well-behaved children I've ever seen, and I'm a father, and I've seen a lot of children. These are really very impressive children. You're doing a great job with them.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Thank you.

**LEG. KRUPSKI:**

And you're really an inspiration, I'm sure, to not only military families but all families for what you've done here.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Thank you.

**LEG. KRUPSKI:**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

I guess the best thing that I'm sure my colleagues would all agree that we can say to you on this occasion for coming to visit with us, you and your beautiful family, is to very simply and sincerely

say thank you.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Thank you. Thank you for having us.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Presiding Officer.

**P.O. GREGORY:**

Hi. I want to thank you also for coming in. You know, a former vet myself, and I understand to some of -- extent the difficulties of, you know, raising the kids while your spouse is deployed, and I know there were several times that, you know, my ex had called me while we were on maneuvers and very stressful because it's, you know, when you're getting deployed you want to make sure everything's, you know, set and solid at home and -- so you can focus on your mission, and you guys carry the brunt of that burden.

So, thank you for your service, for being a wonderful mom, but it's actually almost a supplementary service in a sense to the military because you allow us the ability to focus on our mission, and it can't go understated. And you're right, there are services that -- military posts support networks that are available that you don't see here because we don't have that -- those bases and that. So, it's -- it makes it challenging, but we're here to support you and your family and those in your similar situations. You know, kids in these circumstances go through tremendous -- you know, it's not like dad or mom's going away for a weekend, you know, they're going to stressful environments and -- so, obviously impacts them as well in ways that, you know, are visible and so visible. So, thank you and our prayers are with you that your husband will come back safely to us and that your family will make it strong and -- throughout the process, and Tom and his office, they're tremendous. So, we're here for you, okay? Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Muratore.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. First of all, thank you so much for your service to our country and thank you for your children for living with you and setting the right kind of example. Like what Legislature Krupski said, you know, we're so proud. You're in there for four hours in a room where a lot of bloviating going on, and they sat like young men and ladies. I wanted to ask you a question about the schools. And -- do they reach out for the parents of military personnel and try to help them along and find out what their children need, or is it up to the parent to go to the school?

**MS. PANDOLF:**

It's more -- even when I was leaving in September, I left in September for another training. I had to go to Tennessee, and I left the same day that they started school. I e-mailed the district, you know, their principals, and I said I'm in the military, I'll be gone -- they don't know they're military children unless I tell them. I always -- even today, I told them they'll be out because of this reason we were coming here. I have to notify the school. They don't -- I don't think they have a list that says military child kind of a thing. You know, it's up to the parents 'cause there's people in their classes that I've met just through the years that I'm like oh, wow, you're in the military. There's no -- nobody knows that, you know. You're on the same boat, and yet nobody knows each other.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

I'm concerned that the schools do reach out to the parents or have some kind of program that the parents can or the schools are -- the teachers are notified that the children, you know, the parents being deployed, mom, dad or both of them, and now maybe a little extra care on -- you know, would

help even more with their programs, with their schoolwork or something.

**MS. PANDOLF:**

Yeah. Because unless we tell them, then they wouldn't know.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

So, is there -- and -- for you or the Director, is there no protocol, is there no procedure, and when it is brought to the attention of school administration, is there no set program or training or any services that are provided in any consistent way?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

To my knowledge, there are no formal programs in Suffolk County. Again, as the Presiding Officer referred, when we go to areas where there are larger posts -- we have posts where there are actually schools on base, areas where you have larger populations, and I find the -- some irony in that statement given that we have the largest veterans population in the State of New York, that it really is the responsibility of the parent to communicate to the school. There is not to my knowledge any direct outreach. There is some, you know -- there was some more casual, less formal individuals who are active in their school districts and maybe make an individual effort to communicate to their military and Reserve families but nothing that has been formalized. You know, we've discussed over the years even the possibility of, you know, we've got parent-teacher organizations, we've got special-education committees, that even not necessarily within individual schools but perhaps on a districtwide basis in the various districts establishing a military/veterans parent-teacher association or something to that effect that it would not have to be anything more than perhaps a clearinghouse for information and items of interest to those families. It's probably a good point -- a good place to insert here that -- and again, perhaps Legislator Anker through the Education Committee would be able to expand on this as well, but children of active military personnel are more likely to experience special needs, difficulties in education. They test slightly lower, and, you know, I don't know that that's necessarily a function of so much that they're military children, but the family separations when parents are suddenly and abruptly sometimes extracted from the family situation for extended periods of time.

You've all heard me go down this path before, so I won't beat on it, but the multiple deployments, the issue of multiple deployments and the reliance on National Guard and Reserve forces in these -- in these wars, our families when they are separated, it is my belief - and I have no data to support this. This is just my belief - that these children and these families are less prepared for these separations than are their active-duty counterparts. When you've got a citizen soldier working as a schoolteacher or working as a small-business owner, a realtor, an attorney, what have you, when you're extracted from that environment then thrust back into your military life, the psychological and emotional preparedness is just not there, and I think that that -- I think that extends certainly to the children when you've got a relatively solid family foundation and it's disturbed when called to military duty, and certainly I think there's no greater honor than to serve our nation in uniform, but I think we could do a better job of serving those families who serve us, and in this instance, I think that the -- not only is it the family as -- the family unit as a whole but the children specifically who are at a deficit because of the lack of information, preparedness, education that we have available to us, and there is outside of where there are significant active-duty installations.

**LEG. ANKER:**

I'll follow up.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislature Anker.

**LEG. ANKER:**

In following up with that, you know, I have two -- I have three children. Two is special needs, food allergies, and, you know, it's hard because as a parent you want your kids to blend in, to mix in. You don't want anything obvious standing out, but, you know, honestly, our military, they all deserve medals, you and your children and your family, and I think it's really important that we create some type of awareness of this. And, you know, again, I'm looking forward to working with you. We have so many contact numbers, and we know so many people within the education system. I mean -- and you would think New York State Department of Education would have some type of program. Do they not have a program regarding military families or children?

**MS. PANDOLF:**

No, they don't.

**LEG. ANKER:**

And that's, again, another way we can advocate. We can write letters, you know, maybe from the different committees and ask our State Legislature, you know, and Governor to focus on that, you know, but, again, we need someone like you to bring this to the spotlight, and I'm so glad you're here today, and thank you also, Legislator Stern, for bringing this to our attention.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Thank you very much.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you, thank you. Thanks so much for being with us today. Thank you.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I guess part two of my presentation today would be to -- I owe you a briefing on the status of the Joseph Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program, and I think that this would be an ideal opportunity to introduce to you Michael Stoltz who I believe you all know. Mike is the CEO of Clubhouse of Suffolk and Suffolk County United Veterans who is our contract partner and much more than that. They are our -- we share a soul in many ways when it comes to serving our veterans. Mike is here with us as is John Schultz. John is the -- relatively recently joined-to-the-Program program coordinator for the Dwyer Program, and I would invite both of them to join me at the table at this time.

**LEG. ANKER:**

We'll take a two-second break for the photo; is that okay?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Sure.

*(\*Photograph taken\*)*

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

It was -- I'm sure everybody would agree, you know, here at this Committee we've been talking about and following the developments of the Dwyer Program with great interest, and we've had the opportunity to celebrate with you along the way all the great things that you've been doing, but it was really great to -- for all of us as we were listening to the County Executive's presentation the other evening to call attention to our Director, to call attention to all of the great things that are going on in here in Suffolk County through the Dwyer Program, and for those of us who are familiar with the Program, you know, we've always been very impressed and very supportive of the program, but it was really great to know that now all of our neighbors throughout Suffolk County and anybody who was tuning in had the opportunity to listen to the County Executive's State of the County, and we're now made very well aware of the Program and its successes. So, it's great to welcome you here today for you to -- for us -- the opportunity to meet the new Director and to learn

more about all the great things that you have going on. So, welcome.

**MR. STOLTZ:**

Thank you.

**MR. SCHULTZ:**

Thank you.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

I guess before we get in -- just very quickly, I'll preface the remarks with we will be making a trip on Wednesday to Albany. We'll -- I guess it's a bit of a hill day where we will be visiting our various members of the legislature in Albany advocating for the Program, for its continuation and expansion. I will thank you each again for the letter that you signed last month, both to the leadership of the Assembly and the Senate as well as to the Governor supporting the Program, and I think that that has certainly had an effect, but as always, certainly as you know, when you're dealing with anything that is funding based the advocacy never really stops.

I think we're very fortunate. We're actually probably - it's safe to say - blessed in Suffolk County to have such a talented group of individuals who have been able to be brought together for the purpose of administering this program, and it's just -- it's always -- it's always a very bittersweet thing when I reflect on it, you know, the fact that we are able to make contact with as many veterans and more so now, and I think very, very soon we will be formalizing our work with families. The fact that we're making contact with so many is very gratifying. It's also, you know, sad in some ways that there is so much need, and it always seems that when we have a resource or a capability and we seem to be succeeding with it and we expand it that it's never a matter of diluting the pool of clients that we serve by expanding the staff or the resources within our -- within our program. The need seems to continue to rise to satisfy any expansion that we experience, and it just says to me that, you know, there are folks out there who are just waiting, those who -- that we have maybe not reached yet through our outreach and through our informational campaigns, but people just continue to come to seek out the program, and the successes, as I said, are very gratifying. There are unfortunately instances where we are not as successful, but we couldn't -- we could not ask to have a more committed, more talented team, and I'd like to introduce to you now John Schultz who has joined us as the program coordinator for the Dwyer Program, and I think it's very safe to say that John hit the ground running. We haven't given him a lot of time off since he's joined us, but for purposes of introduction and a little bit of background, I'll introduce you to John, and maybe he can just share with you and a little bit about who is John Schultz.

**MR. SCHULTZ:**

Good afternoon, ma'am; good afternoon, gentlemen. I'm John Schultz. I was -- I'm from Ronkonkoma Local. I am a Marine Corps Veteran. I spent eight years all together. I did a few active, a few Reserves. When I say "Reserves," I was right in SIXCON, some in Brooklyn, some right in Amityville which is now in Farmingdale. I'm a OIF Veteran, got out as a E5 Sergeant. I loved it. I'd probably still be in if I didn't suffer a back injury. I mean, I -- after I came out, hit a little bit of a rough patch. I wish I knew half the benefits were there that I do now. Unfortunately, some of them I just reached a little late, but I'm getting there. I graduated in December with my Bachelor's in Healthcare Administration right from a local school, Briarcliffe, in Patchogue. You know, this is my first, you know, shirt-and-tie job. I love it. It's -- I mean, it's a great experience. It's -- I've learned more about myself in the last five to six weeks of starting this job than I probably knew in a long time. You know, everybody sees the difference in me. I, you know, I enjoy waking up on a Monday morning and running to work. I can say that with God's honest truth. There's nothing more satisfying than this type of job for me, for me. You know, it's -- my wife's noticed a difference, you know, I'm happier, you know, I have a sense of purpose in life at this point. We're doing, I mean, great things with the Dwyer Project. Not -- I mean, it was already doing great

things, but I'm just trying to get it out further, further east. I mean, we have multiple groups starting up. We now have a new group starting in Phoenix House hopefully. The tentative date is March 19th for veterans who have any type of, you know, substance-abuse type issues, which unfortunately is a big thing that relates to PTSD. We have groups, you know, using hippotherapy - if I'm saying it correctly - with the horses hopefully starting up. We're trying all different locations, all different types of groups, all different types of therapy, anything from, you know, bringing people who could help you with breathing and meditation exercises to service dogs to, I guess, service horses as you might call them. It's -- got a busy year ahead of us, but I think we got a lot of great things going on. So, and thank you for letting me share that with you.

**MR. STOLTZ:**

Just to add a couple things on the -- by the way, I'm the token civilian of the project. I try to stay out of their way for the most part, but one piece I just wanted to share with you, that Tom and I got a chance about two weeks ago to go out to dinner with the Dwyer Family who are Joe's sister and two brothers, and to update them on the project that's in their family's name, and it was one of the more wonderful and satisfying experiences that I've had in my professional career, to talk with them, to -- for them to hear how this Program has rolled out. There's a bittersweetness obviously because for them to have wished that the services were there for their brother before he passed as a result of his PTSD. So, that was a -- I think you'd agree, just a wonderful time for us.

John is, as Tom had said, is hitting the ground running. We've kept five very active groups. They're -- not only the content of the groups are wonderful, but they get a full meal every time they come thanks to his -- the Gold Star Moms. The Gold Star Moms who prepare a meal for them, and that's a wonderful thing. We're going to do a couple of additional things that touch on -- some on the presentation you heard earlier. We're going to be doing some family workshops rolling out in April, May and June for -- to be able to start to address some of these issues of transition, to maybe address some of the issues also around emotional resilience and depression and PTSD and things like that as well. We'll be doing a day of wellness for our vets, not only those who are involved in our project but also reaching out to other vets to just talk about some of the things that are out there, some of the evidence-based practices that are out there in the world, in the mental-health world, that help people to, you know, promote their resilience and be able to move forward with their lives. So, we're excited about this project for -- I have been in this -- in the mental-health business for almost 30 years, and to see a project that in one year has touched so many people, created so much conversation, started to change and bend the paradigm of what the experience had used to be there for our vets who struggled in quiet and to now be able to have active dialogue, electronic dialogue, in-person dialogue, all sorts of ways. It's just a wonderful thing to be a part of, and I'm grateful for your having lent your name to letters of support to our delegation in Albany, and hopefully we can continue to find a way to fund this project for many years to come. Thanks.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

And a couple of the things that we're doing that might or may or may not be of interest to you, but I'd invite any of you who'd like to experience firsthand, we have presently a Tai Chi group that meets on Thursdays that apparently for the folks who have participated they found it very fulfilling, and they continue to return. So, if any of you would like to participate in our Tai Chi group one week just to sort of experience it, please reach out and let me know, and I'll give you the particulars. Another one that you might find interesting - and it's very local just on Main Street in Smithtown - one of our peer facilitators who has been with the Program since just about the very beginning is also a New York State licensed acupuncture therapist, and he has now opened a practice in Smithtown, and I would invite you to -- if you're so inclined, I will give you his information, and please feel free to visit Kevin's shop in Smithtown and see what we're doing with acupuncture to help serve and treat our veterans with PTSD and obviously other issues.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Of course, John, thank you for being with us and of course thank you for your service to our nation and our community. I did have a question. We were looking forward to the expansion of the Program to include family members. This is essentially a peer-to-peer program. I was interested -- what is the model that you utilize when you're providing those services to family members? Are they veterans themselves that lead the group, or are they family members that lead the group, or is it some type of a combination?

**MR. STOLTZ:**

Well, we're starting with educational and -- educational workshops. So, where they're going to go from there, we haven't mapped that out completely. There is -- it's going to be led by two of our staff members, both of whom are -- one, Marcel, is a -- is a veteran, and the other is the veteran spouse, I believe, and she's also a mental-health counselor. So, they're going to be doing workshops, I'm sorry, also with Dr. Bellehsen of the -- of the Rosen Center in Bay Shore. So, it's going to start with an educational approach, and then we'll see where it goes. If they want -- if there's interest, you know, for families to be able to continue, like, the same model of a kind of family-to-family support, there are models of that in my world and the mental-health world of families supporting families, you know, but we also may, you know, go more a social route where you just make sure they have opportunities to be together periodically, to have opportunities for their kids to be together periodically. There's certainly, you know, kind of ways that we can go, but first you have to kind of get people together and make the conversation happen.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

And I think significantly -- and I'll just expand a little bit on something that Mike had said. Dr. Bellehsen has evolved and proven to be a really outstanding partner for us. Dr. Bellehsen is with LIJ and through the Rosen Center and the Feinberg Center which is the first of its kind joint private healthcare provider network and VA facility. The building is actually split in two, one side being VA, the other side being LIJ. Dr. Bellehsen runs that program and has been nothing but supportive and helpful and available to us with the Dwyer Program. So, with their support and with the, you know, the actual collaborating with LIJ, I think that speaks volumes. LIJ is not typically in the business of associating their names with things that they don't have great faith in, and we look forward to -- this has been a work in process -- in progress for some time, and I'm very excited about getting it -- actually launching it at this point and reaching out to another entire new community. As much as family members, spouses and children are a part of our community, in the context of the Dwyer Program, I think we're talking about opening an entirely new set of doors. So, very exciting.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislature Anker.

**LEG. ANKER:**

I just wanted -- again, thank you for coming here, John and Mike, for -- and for all your advocacy. I mean, you know, you think about it. If it wasn't for your -- for you two or your organization and, of course, Tom, you know, we're -- how little we would have. You've given us so much, and there's so much more to do. I mean, that's really the most important part. There is a lot we can do, and coming here and giving us direction, you know, in what we can do to help you guys move to the next place, which is basically helping our veterans. So, I just wanted to thank you, and it's interesting to hear that, you know, working with alternative medicines and ideas, you know, I have my thoughts about, the issues with drug addiction and the opiates and, you know, I'm dealing with it throughout. Everyone's dealing with it, but as Chair of Education, it is just saturated in our schools, totally saturated, and of course our military is experiencing it too. So, if we can try to gravitate away from drugs, just in general, it's nice to hear. And, yes, I understand Tai Chi, and Qigong actually is what I've -- what I've done before, but I would be more than happy to join your group there. So, again, thank you for coming out.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislature Muratore.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. To Mike and to Director Ronayne, how do our veterans find out about your programs? Is there something that my office can do? I mean, other than you telling us here, and if the vet's not here listening to this they don't know about it. I mean, is there a program that you're utilizing your efforts to get information out to the vets?

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

We're doing a number of things. Obviously word of mouth is our best advertiser. We spend a lot of time attending various forums, community groups, veterans-organizational meetings. Any type of gathering, whether it be a job show, a trade fair, anything where we have -- not necessarily a veterans audience because our family members quite often are the catalyst for our veteran finding our groups to begin with. We certainly have a great deal of literature, a lot of the chachka, the pens, the key chains. We're trying many, many different approaches. We've not been met with -- we have not had great success with public information in terms of PSAs and things like that. The media, we've had some good results, but they've been fairly few and far between. We haven't had a lot of widespread ability to get out there. It's more grassroots, and we're also -- just to -- just to -- on your point about your offices, we are more than happy to provide all 18 offices of the members with our literature, placards, anything that you'd be willing to have on display available to your constituents through your offices. We'd be happy to provide you with all of that.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Any website information that you might have, if you can get it to my office because we're actively -- we're working on our newsletter and our website. So, we're finding out that, you know, we're getting more information out over the web than we are by giving out a, you know, a pamphlet or something like that. So, if you can work on that for us, that'd be great. My aide will give you our -- well, you know how to get in touch with us. Thanks, Mike, again. Thank you.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

And also if we could perhaps appeal to you, for each of you, if you would consider placing a link on your respective web sites to the Program, we'd be grateful for that as well.

**LEG. MURATORE**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Okay. Again, thank you, thank you so much for being with us and thank you for your service to our service members, to our veterans, to their family members and to our community, and of course we wish you every continued success.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Thanks very much. Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you, Director, as always. Okay, Holly.

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Hello, everyone. I was just thinking when Director Ronayne was speaking when he said that no matter how much money he's putting towards an issue that the need is greater, and I was thinking that certainly applies to a lot of the programs that we have in Suffolk County. I know in our office every day we get phone call after phone call from people saying, you know, I have \$800 a month,

where can I live in Suffolk County, and I want to come back from Florida, and they can't, and how our phones ring off the hook. We probably have 800 to a thousand calls a month, and we have -- people wait on waiting lists for different services, and I -- no matter how much money we put towards a problem or an issue it's just never enough. So, it just -- it just kind of resonated with me as I was sitting there thinking I know that feeling. Just the way things are going.

I just have a couple of announcements. We are doing a training on Monday, St. -- March 17th, and it's from 10:00 to 12:30, and it's on elder abuse of financial exploitation. The Brookdale Center for Healthy Aging is doing the training for us. It's at the media room of the H. Lee Dennison. So, if you have staff in your office that you might want to send to it, you can certainly do that. Just let my office know.

**LEG. ANKER:**

When is it?

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

It's financial abuse and -- elder abuse and financial exploitation, and it's from 10:00 to 12:00 in the media room. So, if you have staff that you'd like to send, please let us know.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Holly, is that training just for County staff, or are there other members of the community and other organizations that --

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

We --

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

-- would be a part of that?

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

We kind of put a -- broaden that out to our contractors. You know, Touro as the legal provider, we asked them to come, all our nutrition contractors, the people who are first sight who might see a senior in a senior center or in one of the programs that I run maybe through RSVP that, you know, they might just want it -- because they're the ones who are going to see the senior who might be in distress somehow. So, it's really for the first responders. So, that's why I'm saying if you have a staff member that you'd like to send, that might see some of your constituents. It might be helpful. You know, and it's really, you know, what they should be looking for and, you know, some of the resources out there. So, that -- that's this -- you know, it's next Monday. So, just let us know. You can just give our office a call and say you have somebody that you would like to send in. I -- it's a pretty wide group. I think right now we're up to about 60 people that are attending. Well, that's between staff and contractors.

The other thing is that this week the regular component of the Home Energy Assistance Program is closing. So, we are -- we did send notices out. Your office should have received them, or they should be in the -- be there today. So, anything that's postmarked as of Friday would still be processed, but after that they would not be processed. And then the emergency component of the HEAP Program is closing as well. So, anything March -- after the close of business on March 17th would have to go to temporary assistance. I just wanted to let you know that. And then also, the Senior Citizen of the Year Award, the application for that are due in my office Thursday if you have anybody that you wanted to nominate, and that award is for somebody who has made an impact on seniors either in the local area where they live or Countywide, and the luncheon is May 15th just so you know, and that's at Villa Lombardi. Anything.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Did you send us an e-mail?

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

On what?

**LEG. ANKER:**

On the luncheon.

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

The luncheon, no. That hasn't gone out yet.

**LEG. ANKER:**

All of the above.

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

No, the luncheon hasn't gone out yet. I think the other things have though. The other information's gone out, okay.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Holly, do you have with you today any HEAP numbers, numbers this year versus last year?

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

The numbers of the applications that we process have gone down over the last several years. I think at our high we were about 6,000, and it's gone down to under 5,000, and I attribute that to the fact that if you're eligible for food stamps and receive food stamps you automatically receive the HEAP benefit. So, we did a big push over the last couple of years to get people on food stamps, and then they don't have to do a HEAP application. So. I think that has contributed to the fact that the numbers are lower that we -- for the applications we process.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

So, it's important for everybody to understand that just because those numbers might be down over the past couple of years doesn't mean that the need has declined.

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

That there are people that are receiving HEAP. And DSS would have those numbers since they're really the primary on HEAP, you know, but we have -- we have made a push in our office to get as many people as we can the benefits for the food stamps because, you know, as you've seen in Newsday, some of the articles, that hunger is definitely an issue, and it's an issue for the elderly, which for years people didn't really think about that. So, wherever we can help somebody get a benefit that they're eligible for, we try to do that.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Thank you. Anybody else?

**DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Thanks.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Holly, thank you. Okay, there being no other business before the Committee, we are adjourned. Thank you.

Veterans & Seniors 3/10/14

*(\*The meeting was adjourned at 1:40 p.m. \*)*