

VETERANS AND SENIORS COMMITTEE
OF THE
SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE
MINUTES

A meeting of the Veterans and Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature was held in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, 725 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York, on September 29, 2014.

Members Present:

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

Also In Attendance:

Lora Gellerstein - Chief Deputy Clerk
Jason Richberg - Legislative Aide
Robert Lipp - Director/Budget Review Office
Massiel Fuentes - Budget Review Office
Debbie Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern
Bob Martinez - Aide to Legislator Muratore
Sarah Simpson - Counsel to the Legislature
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veteran's Services
John O'Neill - Commissioner/Department of Social Services
Tom Vaughn - County Executive's Office
Rick Brand - Newsday
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken and Transcribed By:

Gabrielle Severs - Court Stenographer

*(*The meeting was called to order at 1:05 p.m. *)*

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the committee on veterans and seniors. I'm going to ask everyone to please rise and join us in the pledge of allegiance led by Legislator Barraga.

(Salutation)

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

(Moment of Silence Observed)

Thank you.

Again, good afternoon, everyone and thank you for joining us. We do have items on our legislative agenda today, but first we'll go to Director Ronayne. Commissioner O'Neil, thank you for being with us today. It's a pleasure to have you with us as well.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good afternoon, Mr. Chairman, Members. As always, thank you for the invitation to appear. I will hold my very brief report today if you would rather, and I think we have a couple important pieces of legislation to be discussing. I won't speak for the commissioner, but I think we are prepared to discuss and answer any questions that may be related to the pending legislation.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. So before we then get to the legislative agenda, is there anybody that has any specific questions for the director? All right. Seeing none, we'll go to items on the legislative agenda beginning with **IR 1836, Enhancing outreach and service delivery to homeless veterans in Suffolk County (Stern)**. I'll make a motion to approve. Second by Legislator Muratore. Anybody on the motion?

On the motion, 1836. As I'm sure my colleagues know, items on the agenda today, 1836, 1837, and 1838, cumulatively make up portions of the Housing Our Homeless Heroes Act legislation that I introduced for this cycle. We all know that Suffolk County is home to the largest populations of veterans in all of New York State, and I know that my colleagues share my and our great pride in knowing that. Unfortunately, with such a large, significant veterans population, that also means that in Suffolk County we have an unacceptably large number of homeless veterans. And so working with our partners in so many of the outstanding not-for-profit organizations that we have here in Suffolk County, working with the director, working with the commissioner, working with many other members of Suffolk County government and all levels of government, there is now before us a series of bills that together make the Housing Our Homeless Heroes Act here in Suffolk County.

Bill number one before us is 1836, and this has to do with delivering specific services to our veterans wherever we find them particularly within our department of social services, and I'm pleased to have the commissioner here who can perhaps speak to that along with the director as to some of the aims, some of the goals that we wish to accomplish with this particular bill and be available to answer any questions that my colleagues might have.

But it is my hope that these three bills before us today as well as one other that is coming as well will ensure that our veterans, those who go off to war to protect the ground that we stand on it, it

should be unacceptable to all of us that he or she would have to come home to sleep on it. When they come home to Suffolk County to fight a new battle just to keep a roof over their heads. As we all know, home is not just four walls and a roof, but it is perhaps the most critical sign of security and hope and dignity that our veterans and their families most certainly deserve here in our communities. So with that, 1836 is before us. If you go to the director and then to the commissioner.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. My position, as you and I have discussed in the past, is overwhelmingly supportive of this legislation. What we aim to enable ourselves to accomplish by an action of this piece of legislation is to effectively both consolidate and streamline the resources of both my agency and Department of Social Services in providing direct access to Suffolk County veterans service officers, accredited veterans service officers, upon their visit to a DSS service center. Very often, as we know, when an individual, be they a veteran or a nonveteran, when it becomes necessary for them to engage multiple layers of government traveling from location to location to access various elements of the services that they are in need of, it places an unusual burden on those residents, on those veterans.

This legislation, by placing accredited veterans service officers in DSS service centers -- and I will tell you that I have met with the commissioner and with his leadership and we have discussed and we have laid out what I believe to be -- we mutually believe to be an outstanding overlay of site location, presence, and fluidity in the ability to move those resources in and about the system as is necessary. But it would provide the ability for veterans upon presentation at DSS to meet immediately with a veterans service officer to both identify benefits and services to which they may be eligible. Obviously, certainly examining their level of need. But as I have said in the past, one of the things that I find extraordinarily valuable to Suffolk County, both our residents, our taxpayers, and our veterans is this legislation will permit us, it will allocate our resources in such a way that we also would have a greater ability to assess the greater benefit to the veteran and his or her family; and by that, I mean not only delivery of the specific services to which they are in need of but specifically to identify whether the county and DSS/Veterans Service Agency are the ideal place to access those resources. It's entirely possible we do regularly encounter clients where the better level of service, the greater level of service to that veteran would actually be to divert their access to the federal level benefits and services. And while I would say that my primary objective is to ensure that the greater level of services always accessed and provided to the veteran and his or her family, that additional layer also potentially represents very significant cost savings to the County of Suffolk. So I believe it very reasonable to say any costs associated with the implementation of this piece would certainly be offset by the greater level of access to federal services, thereby reducing the number of county dollars being invested in the delivery of these services.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Commissioner.

COMMISSIONER O'NEIL:

Good afternoon, Chairman Stern, Veterans Committee Members. As Tom said, described it in great detail, this is an excellent opportunity to what I call "smart government initiatives." It brings together two agencies to deliver peer-to-peer service, VSO in our centers and DSS centers, and we can provide expedient type of services. Not only that, as Director Ronayne was alluding to, going from department to department, building to building, can be challenging for anybody especially if you're going through public transportation. This reduces that need and centers the services in one place for one-stop shopping, so I strongly encourage and strongly recommend all legislators to pass this legislation on behalf of the veterans of Suffolk County. Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you, Commissioner. Anybody for the director or the commissioner?

LEG. BARRAGA:

Well, they are going to stay there for the next bills, right?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

They'll still be here, yeah.

All right. I'll call the vote on 1836. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? ***IR 1836 is approved. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)***

IR 1837, Authorizing action to end veterans homelessness in Suffolk County ("Housing Our Homeless Heroes Act") (Stern). I'll make a motion to approve. Second by Legislator Anker.

On the motion, this is a resolution that seeks to create the process of coordination among our various county agencies to bring together our director, our commissioner, representatives from our real estate department, even our IT department to, among other things, develop a plan for identifying those who require this type of assistance, who are homeless, to identify those veterans in Suffolk who are in danger and take a proactive approach to prevent homelessness in the first place as well as creation of a web portal that will bring together all of the various resources at all levels of government so that even in the event a veteran or his or her family isn't necessarily the one to go ahead and pull down all the information and make application, at least they have an idea as to what services may be available, what they might be entitled to, what kind of a process might be involved so that they don't necessarily find out when they get to a service provider's door and then just get discouraged with the process. This is a way to be proactive in our outreach efforts at a governmental level, at a not-for-profit level to ensure that this effort truly is a countywide effort among all of our stakeholders, and that's what this particular legislation seeks to accomplish.

Legislator Barraga.

LEG. BARRAGA:

On the resolution. Certainly when you're sitting on a veterans committee or a senior citizens' committee, you want to be able to support as much as possible the legislation before you, and that is my intent. On the same token, I think I have an obligation to ask a few questions with reference to this particular bill. As I understand it, additional funds are not provided in the resolution for the departments to execute the directives. The DSS, from what I understand, says you do not need any additional funding. I guess you would assign current personnel to take over this particular function. By the same token, the Division of Real Property Acquisition and Management estimates that they need additional staff to comply with the resolution. However, they are not able to identify the number of additional staff or the positions or titles needed. The agency, however, estimates that they will require one additional VSO, veterans service officer, to comply with this proposed resolution. The cost factor is \$36,877 and, in addition, another 16,269 in fringe benefits, and over a five-year period, it's probably around \$350,000.

I guess the question I have, if these agencies indicate they need additional people to handle the mechanics associated with this particular bill, should we not table this bill and let the legislature take this action up in its negotiations on the budget because I would think that any additional personnel would find themselves -- those salaries for those individuals would be in the general fund budget, the regular county budget. Are we jumping ahead too soon by passing this bill and almost obligating ourselves to put these people in place when we know fiscally on a countywide basis we are still in rather serious straits? Two years ago, we had a thousand more people than we have today, but yet because it's veterans, it can be seniors, we feel we can justify or want to justify the additional expenditure of additional personnel.

It kind of reminds me of what the New York State Legislature recently did about four or five months ago where they, as far as I'm concerned -- they don't call it an unfunded mandate, giving veterans a school tax exemption; yet, when you speak to a state legislator, they'll say, Well, it's really not a mandate, Tom, it's sort of -- we left it at local option. Well, who in his right mind, if you're sitting on a school board, is going to vote against veterans? The challenge you face is that in a given district, if you grant the exemption, and almost every district will do so, there is a shift. You have a \$100 million budget and giving those veterans that exemption at the school tax level means that five or six million, they get the exemption but that money is shifted to nonveterans; plus the 1.2 or the 2 percent normal increase in that budget. All I'm saying is that this is a worthwhile endeavor, but what you're doing here as part of the bill, as I understand it, is that these agencies will have to go out and hire additional personnel and my feeling is that if that's the case, I'd rather take it up in budget negotiations as we move along in the next four or five weeks and table this bill.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Before if the director or the commissioner wants to answer the comment from Legislator Barraga, Legislator Barraga, I don't know what copy you're looking at from right now but --

LEG. BARRAGA:

I know there's an amended version.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

There is an amended version. So with the amended version, that comes off of conversations with real estate department about what may need to be done going forward, so some of the changes we had done in conjunction with the real estate department who were raising some of those issues as well. So what we had come up with -- go ahead.

LEG. BARRAGA:

They would not have to hire additional personnel?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Real estate, at this point, is going to be working with the other agencies to do an analysis of what needs to be done going forward on their end, so at this point it's indeterminate. They don't know what additional personnel, if any, they would need to accomplish the goal.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Well, Steve, wouldn't it be wise to wait until they ascertain what they will need or not need before we pass this particular bill?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Well, this is a bill that directs them to ascertain what they need.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Well, couldn't they do that on their own?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

They can, and so this is what they're doing. Working with our other governmental departments is the process they can do right now on their own.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Real Property Tax could work with you now; you don't need this legislation passed. At some point, come into the Budget Review Committee and the legislature have these meetings for the next several weeks and let them know what you actually need if you need addition personnel.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

That's not the only aspect of the bill.

LEG. BARRAGA:

That's the aspect I'm keying in on because of the fiscal situation of the county. It's a worthwhile piece of legislation. No one wants to vote against veterans. I won't vote against veterans, but this could well entail additional personnel being hired, and the question is whether or not the administration is supportive of doing this. In the light of laying off 1,000 people in the last two years and still having fiscal constraints on us. Maybe it's better to wait and see, you know, what we can negotiate on the executive branch on this particular issue before we pass this particular bill.

Tom, do you want to chime in on this?

MR. VAUGHN:

So I have -- I have spoken with Jill Rosen-Nikoloff regarding the legislation. She had let me know that she had had some concerns which she shared with the chairman's staff, and we are happy to see that those changes were included in the bill and would hope -- we are supportive of it and would hope that it moves forward. I understand certainly, Legislator Barraga, the concerns that you raise here. I think that they are certainly prudent ones, but I think asking us to come back and let this committee know what those needs are going to be, I think, is a pretty prudent first step.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Anybody else? Legislator Krupski.

LEG. KRUPSKI:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman. So this is a question that I've asked before. A lot of these young men and women are veterans because of the ongoing war in various parts of the world. It's not a county war. I don't think the county legislature authorized it. It's a federal war. Has the federal government stepped up in any way to help these veterans and to try to mitigate the financial concerns that the county is facing in trying to help these people either with homes or with other services?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Let me answer Legislator's question, and then I'll go to Director Ronayne, and I think this perhaps goes to Legislator Barraga's concern as well. There has been, fortunately, a major effort at the federal level to put up federal dollars for this purpose, SSVF and other programs. That's why the time is right now, because federal benefits are there, dollars perhaps are there, but the federal government's efforts to make a real substantial impact on this ongoing challenge will only come with a local effort. What we do here in Suffolk County may look very different than what it looks like in Huntington, West Virginia or somewhere in California. Each municipality has its own very specific role to play whether that's at a governmental level or working with our local not-for-profits. It takes much more than dollars. But why the urgency, Legislator Barraga? Because the federal dollars are being allocated right, and in order to be successful, in order to have a meaningful use of those federal dollars, we have to have a meaningful local program and effort, and that's what this is a part of. But I'll go to the director who I'm sure has additional information on the federal government's role.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

You are correct in saying, Chairman, that there have been a number of federal initiatives announced primarily in the past 12 to 18 months, specifically SSVF which has just come into its second round of funding. There's approximately \$4 million in additional federal funding that has been allocated to the two primary SSVF providers operating in Suffolk County, and we operate -- they are not contract

agencies, but we do operate with a sense on of partnership in the work that they do. A lot of the work that they're doing is very specifically mandated through the SSVF narrative in so much as the amount of funds or the allocation of the funds that they have been granted for this purpose. Forty percent of it is allocated to housing homeless or veterans in danger of becoming homeless. The remaining allocation actually goes to providing necessary resources to aid veterans and their families in preventing homelessness, and that includes up to and including housing assistance, transportation, childcare. These are some, certainly not all, of the moving parts involved in the SSVF process.

By virtue of the presence, the existence of the ground gain that SSVF has in Suffolk County right now, it has resulted in our having a greater ability to provide direct resources to our veterans with less-intensive case management on the part of our agency because of the presence of the case management resources available through SSVF. So there has been assistance in the sense of -- by partnering with our federal partners, our work has become somewhat more manageable in that regard. Some of the other programs that are in --

LEG. BARRAGA:

Tom, let me ask a quick question. Can any of that federal money be used to pay the salaries of potential hirees here?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Negative. We have spoken specifically about this. In fact, I had another discussion this morning with Director Phil Moschitta of the Northport V.A. Medical Center specifically to working together, he and I, to identify federal dollars already in place that he may have access to that he could allocate to the county for the purposes of paying for veterans service officers. At this time, I do not have knowledge of any specific funds that would be applicable to that need.

LEG. BARRAGA:

One final question to DSS. Once this database is put together of potential veteran homelessness, how does that listing, that database interface with regular homelessness? Do the veterans then take a preference over those who are nonveterans? How does that system then work? Because you only have so many slots to house homeless people. We've been dealing with this issue for a couple of years now. How does that system work? You do the database. You establish X amount of veterans. These are near homeless or homeless. Over here you have the normal group who's homeless. Who gets preference, or does anybody get preference?

COMMISSIONER O'NEIL:

Actually, we have contracted with two different agencies to specifically deal with our veterans, so it's separate slots for veterans that exists today. We also, with this additional database it'll help us with other resources, but specifically within DSS, we actually have reports that are coded, those who are veterans, and we've actually been working with Director Ronayne's office so we can provide wraparound services, and so when this project continues to move hopefully down a path, we've already hit the ground running identifying veterans, and now what we'd like to do is those veterans that are in a shelter, for instance, get them into this type of housing, transitional housing, that they'll be better equipped to receive services as well as opposed to being in a shelter. The veterans department has much more resource available to provide services than DSS does as it specifically pertains to veterans; so that would be the hope here.

LEG. BARRAGA:

You don't use the same potential housing; it's two separate areas?

COMMISSIONER O'NEIL:

We already, today, in emergency shelters, we have veterans only housing today. The vision for this is, going forward, is not just emergency shelters but it's transitional-type settings, so they can transition into their permanent setting or into a permanent setting.

LEG. BARRAGA:

So let's say you don't have a slot available in a veterans housing unit but there's two or three slots in other areas. Does the veteran get a preference over somebody else who is nonveteran who has been on a list for that housing?

COMMISSIONER O'NEIL:

The question's hypothetical in nature because today we have more than enough slots for veterans in emergency shelter situations. So quite frankly, we haven't come across that situation yet where we don't have a slot for veteran.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Okay.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

If I could add to that, only this morning the chairman, Commissioner O'Neil, and myself attended a ceremony, really more of a public acknowledgement of a program that has been in place for several weeks now, about four weeks where veterans who have already been through the veteran-specific sheltering process and have now advanced because of, in many cases, access to relatively new services that we have available to us, these veterans are now transitioning out of the emergent-type housing situations that they had been finding themselves in, and they're in transitional housing largely with the support of the HUD-VASH program. We have a community in Amityville that we dedicated this morning that houses 60 veteran and families. There is another project of similar scope planned for Ronkonkoma.

As these programs come online, part and parcel to the administration of these communities, of these veteran-specific communities, our access to very specific programmatic opportunities. These programs have already resulted in veterans advancing beyond the stage of needing that housing assistance, re-engaging through a variety of training opportunities, reengaging the employment market and are now in a number of cases in the process of obtaining home ownership. So the process is actually quite beneficial in the aggregate -- in the long-term for not only the veteran but for the community, that veteran who, only a few short years ago, may have been residing in a shelter operated or funded through DSS is now somebody who we are working with.

LEG. BARRAGA:

So what I'm say is not an issue. You have two separate groupings, two separate areas.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

There are a lot of moving parts to this and the experience that we've had over the past several years --

LEG. BARRAGA:

I just don't need somebody coming and screaming at me about they're on a list and all of a sudden somebody came along and jumped over them.

You know, sometimes you see that in other types of housing.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

(Inaudible) you screaming at me and I would rather we not go there, so we'll do everything that we can to prevent that from that being the case.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Krupski.

LEG. KRUPSKI:

Thank you. I think you answered my question about the services that you're providing, and you mentioned the housing in Amityville; so that's only for veterans and their families?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Uh-huh.

LEG. KRUPSKI:

And who pays for that? Who owns the housing?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Suffolk County provided I believe \$1.5 million in last year's budget. It may have been 2012, but the vast majority of the funding was through a federal grant that was provided. The site selection and development was conducted through an organization known as Concern For Independent Living. And again, that property right now is occupied by 60 -- it's been populated by 60 veterans and their families, 60 individual units. The Ronkonkoma Project, I believe the funding has been allocated -- if I'm not mistaken, the County's commitment to the Ronkonkoma Project is \$750,000. But again, the large majority of the funds being applied to these programs are federal dollars, and they do result in any number of benefits to the larger community beyond the service to the veteran, and I think that's an important piece to keep in our focus. While these are veteran-specific programs, the larger benefit is to our greater community which (inaudible) government.

LEG. KRUPSKI:

Thank you. Legislator Stern, I'm not sure because the discussion going around a bit. You're saying that this legislation necessary in order to get federal money and that it won't necessarily result in the hiring of more people; or that in we need this legislation so we'll know if we have to hire more people but it doesn't mandate that we do hire more people.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

There's nothing in this bill that we're considering right now that mandates the hiring of any new people. In fact, the idea here is that we're able to, with existing personnel, identify how best to proceed in coordination with all of our various agencies and services, obviously to be able to do it efficiently and to assist our veterans, as the director had pointed out, not only having a greater ability to utilize the service that we offer at the county but services offered by the other levels of government as well, perhaps even federal dollars, which over time is certainly going to be helpful, not just to our veterans but to county taxpayers.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And I guess I would say, Legislator Krupski, to your point beyond any opportunity to increase staff, we as department heads are only too aware of the constraints faced by the county right now and the fiscal stewardship that is incumbent upon us as department heads to ensure that we don't -- we don't perceive any of this as a grab bag where we would be securing any assistance beyond what we absolutely believe necessary to accomplish our mission, no more.

LEG. KRUPSKI:

Well, I didn't mean to portray you guys as being fiscally reckless.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Anybody else on 1837? I'll call the vote. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? ***IR 1837 is***

approved. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)

IR 1838, Adopting Local Law No. -2014, A Local Law to expand the County's Veterans Housing Program (Stern). This is a local law, so this needs to be tabled for public hearing, so I will make a motion to table for public hearing. Second by Legislator Barraga. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? ***IR 1838 is tabled for public hearing*** at our next next general session. ***(VOTE: 5-0-0-0)*** Is there anybody else for the director or for the commissioner? Director, did you have anything else?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The public hearing date, October 7?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Yes, it is. Commissioner?

COMMISSIONER O'NEIL:

Just again, you have my support, my department's support. We would love to see this legislation passed. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Thank you for being with us today, Commissioner, Director, to the both of you, not just for being here today and for your service but in particular for providing such important and outstanding assistance in drafting this important legislation, so thank you.

All right. There being no other business before the committee, we are adjourned.

(*The meeting was adjourned at 1:39 p.m. *)