

VS 11/7/2014

**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 7, 2014.

**Members Present:**

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

**Also In Attendance:**

Jason Rosenberg - Chief Deputy Clerk  
George Nolan - Counsel to the Legislature  
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veteran's Services  
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director of Office for the Aging  
Rick Brand - Newsday  
All Other Interested Parties

**Minutes Taken and Transcribed By:**

Gabrielle Severs - Court Stenographer

*(\*The meeting was called to order at 12:36 p.m. \*)*

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Good afternoon, everyone, and welcome to the committee on Vets and Seniors. I'm going to ask everybody to please rise and join us in the pledge 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 overseas and current veterans, as we approach Veterans Day, of course, as we keep all of them and their families in our thoughts and prayers as well.

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

Welcome, everyone, and thank you for being here. Let's start off with Holly.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Hello. Just want to make sure it worked. I just wanted to talk about a couple things that are going on. We recently did our public hearings last week, week before, and we had over 100 seniors come out for them. Many of them spoke about the services that are provided at the senior centers and through our contracts and, you know, the need is great. They talk about what caregiver support programs mean to them, what the meal programs mean to them, just the social supports that they receive at a senior center. I just wanted to tell you that the money that we put in our budgets are well-used and well-liked by the seniors, so it was nice because it makes me think why we do what we do every year when I go to these public hearings and I hear about the good things that happen. I just wanted to share that with you that it was very successful, the hearings. They were very happy about what we provided, but, you know, we always need more. Just to give you a heads-up on that one.

Also, the outreach that we did for food stamps, I don't know if I mentioned this the last time, but the food stamps -- if you're eligible for HEAP, you could also be eligible for food stamps. We did 2,500 letters back in August. We trained our HEAP workers to be able to help somebody if they called about the food stamp application. The letter went out saying, Listen, you might be eligible, give us a call, we can help you through the process; and out of those 2500 letters we sent out, 500 people were approved for food stamps, so we had almost a 20 percent rate of approval which was terrific because that means those people, now that they have food stamps, will not have to apply for the HEAP program in the future. They will automatically be enrolled in HEAP, so that was a huge outreach effort that worked very well for us, that will allow people's budgets to get them a little more. We were very happy with that.

The HEAP program opens November 17. We've already received several thousand applications from the early outreach of apps that the state does, and we know we'll get another huge influx come November 17, but we can't -- the applications can't go out from us until November 17 for people who call, and they will be processed and payments start after November 17, so I just wanted to let you know. We haven't heard whether that program is going to go -- you know, if additional federal money's been put into it, so it could be a short year for HEAP, so I encourage people to apply early.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Holly, do you know at this point in the process how these numbers, this kind of response compares to last year?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

You know, it's kind of hard for us to tell these days because of the fact that we've done outreach for the food stamp program. When they're auto -- if they have auto-enrollment into HEAP, we're not seeing those applications anymore. So over the last couple years, our applications went from a high of about 6600. We're down to less than 5,000 that we receive in a given year. So we know the numbers are going down, but they're going down because people are automatically receiving their HEAP benefit.

But I think we're not in bad shape. As of October 31, we had received 2700 applications in the office, and I think overall last year in our program, I think we did about 4400. So more than half come in before the program actually opens, and then the rest are people who haven't been on the program before once November 17 hits or people who are just delayed and putting it out there, so... But I would encourage everybody to apply as early as possible because we haven't heard if the program's going to continue on; like it usually goes through March or April. We don't know if that's going to happen this year yet.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

And usually at the point that they do discontinue the program, how much notice would you give?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Not very much; maybe a week. It's not very much, so people, they won't receive the benefit if the federal money doesn't get extended.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Right, and not much time for them to find that out.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Right. It's not a lot, so I would just encourage everybody, if you talk to people, that they should be doing that sooner than later. And then the open enrollment for Medicare is ongoing right now. It started in October and it goes to December 7. We did transition our HICAP program, health insurance counseling program, to the retired senior volunteer program, so they're recruiting volunteers to work in that program. As you know, it's difficult because Medicare is an onerous program to learn. But they are taking the phone calls on the HICAP line, which is now through RSVP, and that number is 979-9490, extension 18. Calls that come to our office, we will do as we always have. Our staff handles any calls that come through from the 853-8200, but the HICAP hotline is now through RSVP. And we're hoping we'll be able to serve more people that way because as they get more volunteers, they'll have people who can meet people in libraries, do one on counseling or more over the phone, so hopefully it will be more beneficial to the people in the county. So that's what's going on in our office. Any questions?

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good. Legislator Muratore.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Hi, Holly. How are you?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Hi. Good.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

A couple of questions. I noticed that during the summer, they had a concert sponsored by County Executive Bellone and Legislator Calarco and Lindsay over in Patchogue. Now there's one scheduled over in Riverhead with Schneiderman, Krupski, and Bellone. Is there anything scheduled for any other parts of the Island?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

That program in Riverhead was I think in response to the fact that we had such an overflow from the Patchogue concert, so they decided to do another one, and so they went to a different part of the county just to see if we got more people. So we're still taking people for tickets for that, because I think it's only about half full at this point, a little more than half full, and that concert's in two weeks. So it's open to everyone, and next year I believe we're going to try to do a bigger venue if we could find one. The problem is finding venues for these events that we do. There's not a lot of places that have a lot of seats. We're working on it. It's the first time we've done that because, honestly, our picnic was losing momentum. You know, 30 years ago, we had 3,000 people at a picnic -- or 20 years ago, we had 3,000 at a picnic, and we were down to about 600, so this was another way to try to attract the younger older resident. You know, we're looking at the 50 to 70 population, which we haven't really had a lot of success with. And, I have to say, the concert in Patchogue, we had a full house, 1200 people. It was the geographic we were looking for. We were able to tell them about our office, and we had program and services guide there, so it really did everything we thought -- we were hoping for. So we'll see what happens on the next concert, but we are looking at different -- you know, maybe doing one large concert; see what happens next year.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Well, if you go during the summer, you can use Bald Hill, right?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

If -- if --

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Over there at the Pennysaver.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

When we looked into concert venues initially, some just didn't respond to us. You know, so we have to -- again, it's the first time out so we're still looking at other venues.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Where does the money come from for these concerts?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

I have some funding in my budget I can use for different special events, so we were trying it out this year. I don't do a lot of public events. I do the luncheon in May for Older Americans Month, and then we used to do a summer event, so this is really taking the place of the summer event.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Do you have any idea what these things cost? Do you have a bottom line on the one in Patchogue?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

The one in Patchogue was, because we also did a mailing, was about under 10, just under 10. This one is costing probably 7, 6700.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

That's for the venue and for the concert and for the mailing?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

This one, we just did mailing to clubs and groups like that. The other one was mailing that went out to houses, and that costs more money. We didn't do it for this one.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Did you go to all the clubs?

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

It went to -- let's see; how did I do this? Yeah, we did all the clubs that we have addresses for, but I don't have addresses for every club because some towns will not share the mailing list, so then we send it to the town and ask them to get it out.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

(Indiscernible) through the town.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

So it went out to about 170 either clubs or individuals that were on our mailing list for different things.

**LEG. MURATORE:**

Okay. Thanks, Holly.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Legislator Barraga.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

I was very interested in how you characterized the 50- to 70-year-old group as the "younger-older group."

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Sorry.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

Now if they're older, are they the "on-your-way-to-heaven-or-hell group".

(\*Laughter\*)

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

You know, honestly, the services in our office, we've been able to tell, as much as I hate the program we use for our database that I have to do for long-term services, it really shows me who we serve and probably -- I think it's 66 percent of the people we serve are 75 plus that receive services at our office. But we know caregivers are younger, and we know people need to know about our services before anybody reaches crisis, so we really do want to get into the 50, 55 plus, 70 range. And they don't need my services but the concert seemed to be a good way to at least get them to hear that we exist.

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

I'm just bitter about missing the younger-older group.

(\*Laughter\*)

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Should I up that? What do you want me to make it?

**LEG. BARRAGA:**

50 to 75.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

All right, 50 to 75. How's that? We're good. Thanks.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**  
Legislator Anker.

**LEG. ANKER:**

While you're there, you know, I have a very large senior community within my district, lots of senior communities, but I read an article about how the baby boomers are moving off Long Island. Do you see that? What's your --

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**  
The AARP's report.

**LEG. ANKER:**  
Exactly.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

I did go to their meeting on that when they did that a week ago. That was an interesting one because one of the things they talk about is the great wealth that the baby boomers have, so you really want to try to retain them on Long Island in order to keep their money as part of the reason -- you don't want them to leave to go to Florida and then come back when they're very ill and their money's gone. So we really do want to attract people to be here. You know, I just look at the same numbers everybody else does, and we are trying to keep people here. The age-friendly community initiative that the county exec started is part of that. That program, you know, that's three to five years to look at to try to make our county more age-friendly to all ages, and so I'm hoping some good things will come out of that as well.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Yeah. Again, you know, it was concerning because, you know, we look at Long Island and you hear about the retired folks moving to Florida. I'm from Florida and the snowbirds will come -- you know, go down and it's something that's been going on for decades and decades. But what happens is -- and I have seen this in the past 30 years since I've been here on Long Island -- is that folks move down to Florida or South Carolina or Virginia. They know it's not really meant for them. They don't like the climate, they don't like the environment, and they come right back up here. So, again, maybe we can discuss on the side what we can do to enlighten them on the wonderful parks, the ability to hop over to New York City. We have so much.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

I think they know that. One thing that came up at the meeting that I was at last week, and this was a very telling thing as the gentleman listened to everybody talk about everything that makes the county so wonderful -- and Nassau as well because it was a two-county meeting -- but the one person said, You know, bottom line is I'm going to go where my kids go. So we have to retain our younger residents in order to keep your older residents because if their kids are moving off the island, they're going where they are because they want to be near their grandchildren. So I think, you know, it behooves all of us to try to make the county age-friendly.

**LEG. ANKER:**

Very, very good point. Very good point, Holly.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Doesn't matter how nice the parks are if the grandchildren are in South Carolina.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Very good. Holly, thank you.

**MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:**

Yep.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Director Ronayne.

While the director is settling in, I'll say that for myself and my colleagues, I'm sure, we wish you congratulations on your well-deserved honor coming up; so we say congratulations.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Thank you. Thank you very much. Thank you, as always, for the invitation to appear. I'd like to begin by apologizing to Legislator Stern and to Debbie Harris. I have been -- it's been a bit of a chaotic week, and I know that I've got some calls owed, so I just want to publicly apologize for not being as responsive as I normally try to be. Before I get into my -- just the few items that I'd like to report on to you, I would also like to make you all aware of the fact that we have had another young soldier from Suffolk County -- we have had a 24-year-old Afghanistan veteran from Ronkonkoma took his own life earlier this week. We have been working very closely with his family. We are working in terms of support to coordinate arrangements and so forth. But this series of tragedies that doesn't seem to leave us is a constant reminder of the importance of ensuring that we have adequate, ample access to the services that are available to these returning service members. Whether they've been home 30 days or 30 years, there is a tremendous need that exists for this population, and once again, we're seeing the effects of a service member who has worn our uniform, gone to war, returned home wearing those -- the moral injury of war, the psychological scars of war, and has chosen to end his life in such a way that's a tragedy.

And while we are very proactive in Suffolk County and I believe that we do a very good job, there is clearly more work to be done, and I would just like to let you know that specialist Darian Clark of Ronkonkoma served one year in Afghanistan, a total of four years of service as a member of the 101st Airborne. During his one year in Afghanistan, he was the recipient of the Combat Infantryman Badge, the Air Assault Badge, Airborne Parachute Wings; and in addition to other decorations, and this is quite exceptional, in the 12 months that he served in county in Afghanistan, he was the recipient of three different Army commendation medals. That's exceptional for anybody to accumulate, three commendation medals in the period of one year. For those medals to have been earned in a combat theater is especially telling.

I would just like you to all remember that name, Darian Clark; served us well, served us proudly, and we'll be burying him on Monday.

On a much more positive note, we had a senior management meeting at the V.A. Medical Center in Northport yesterday, and a number of topics were discussed. I think the one that most excited me was there is a new program manager on the Women Veterans Program at the Northport V.A., and the Women Veteran's Program has a standalone unit on the fourth floor of the medical center where the unit specifically provides specific services to only our women veterans.

It's actually a very, very nice unit. The new program manager is Rose Williamson. Some of you may know her. Rose has been a fixture on the scene of veteran services in Suffolk County for quite some time, and Rose has taken some very bold, very aggressive steps quickly in her tenure to expand the nature of the services that are offered to our increasing numbers of women veterans. There are approximately 8,000 women veterans residing on Long Island, in Nassau and Suffolk County. About 6,000 of them are enrolled at Northport V.A. Some of the services that have recently been added are full-time -- and this is for anybody with family -- military families or the

general. This is clearly a new V.A. V.A. is now staffed with full-time OBGYN services. They have a family planning and birth control program. They are treating STDs. They have a standalone program for military sexual trauma and an interesting number that I was not aware of until yesterday is that approximately 80 percent of the women veterans who present for care at the Northport V.A. to the women veterans program, approximately 80 percent of those have PTSD diagnoses, so that's an extraordinary number.

I think that what Rose has initiated is remarkable. I think that it's a sign of things to come at the V.A. and I'm just, I guess, trying to share with you that they're open for business for our women veterans at Northport V.A. Please, if those questions should ever arise, please send them to us or to Northport because the care is now available.

You know, one thing that Rose was especially excited about yesterday was reporting that they, up until recently did not have Doppler technology to perform sonograms at Northport. She has now had Doppler sonogram units installed in both the E.R. and on the women's services unit. So not the V.A. that I remember when I came home, and I think that's a very positive thing.

Additionally, coming out of the meeting at V.A. yesterday, we're all familiar with some of the issues that have been present in the press over the past year or so related to V.A. With regard to access to care, V.A. has begun mailing cards to all eligible veterans. It'll be a supplemental card we have in addition to our V.A. ID. Every veteran will receive this card, and essentially what this card will allow us to do is at any point in time where V.A. is unable to provide a service, if they're unable to provide that service in a timely fashion, or if you are geographically distant from a V.A. service point, this card will allow you to seek care in the community under what is known as "fee basis". The cards will be issued in order of need. Those living outside of a 40-mile radius from V.A. care will be receiving their cards first. There are under -- I think there are under 200 of those in Suffolk County, obviously mostly on the far east end, but the cards are not -- only for those who live beyond that 40-mile radius. The V.A. will be applying the "40-mile, 30-day rule," so if you reside outside of a 40-mile radius or if you cannot be provided services through V.A. within 30 days of requesting that appointment, you will be given consent to seek care in the community using this card and then the provider will simply bill the V.A. for that care. So they claim that by mid-December, all veterans who are enrolled in V.A. healthcare will have received our cards. Again, I think a very bold step.

There is a limited amount of funding. I believe Northport at this point has been allocated \$10 million for the coming year to provide services in the community through fee basis, and I guess as they go forward, they will establish whether or not that amount needs to be supplemented or not, but it's a good start.

The other thing I would just like to say, not so much in the form of a report, but very excited about the upcoming Suffolk County marathon. We're looking forward to that. We've already begun our planning meetings. We've already held a meeting with the veterans community, the leaders in the veterans community, and a number of the veteran non-for-profit organizations in Suffolk County. We've also invited to and have had our invitation accepted by the U.S. Army recruiting command for New York to be participants in the event, help in the planning, the execution of the event and the after-event, so we're working very diligently to make sure that this is a terrific success.

I have also agreed -- I'm going on the record -- I've also agreed with the county executive that September 13 of next year, I will be doing the half marathon, so more to follow.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Anybody for the director? Very good.

**DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

Thank you.

**CHAIRMAN STERN:**

Director, thank you, as always.

Okay. Going, then, to the agenda and to *tabled resolutions*.

**IR 1838, Adopting Local Law No. -2014, A Local Law to expand the County's Veterans Housing Program (Stern).** This has been on for a public hearing, which has been closed, so it's properly before us. I'll make a motion to approve. Second by Legislator Anker. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? **Approved (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)**

**IR 1853, Adopting Local Law No. -2014, A Local Law to strengthen requirements for nonprofit veterans organizations soliciting donations in Suffolk County (Spencer).** This has to be tabled for a public hearing, so I'll make that motion to table for public hearing. Second by Legislator Krupski. All in favor? Opposed? Abstentions? 1853 is **tabled for public hearing. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0)**

Anybody else? There being no other business before the committee, we are adjourned.

*(\* The meeting was adjourned at 1:00 p.m. \*)*