

**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 24, 2015.

Members Present:

Legislator Steven Stern - Chairman
Legislator Tom Barraga - Vice-Chair
Legislator Sarah Anker
Legislator Al Krupski - Excused
Legislator Tom Muratore - Excused

Also In Attendance:

Jason Richberg - Chief Deputy Clerk
Sarah Simpson - Counsel to the Legislature
Debbie Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern
Bill Shilling – Aide to Legislator Calarco
Katie Horst – County Executive's Office
Tom Ronayne - Director of Veteran's Services
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director of Office for the Aging
Andrew Tarantowicz - Budget Review Office
Ken Rosenblum - Touro Law School
Ben Pomerance - State of New York Division of Veterans Affairs
All Other Interested Parties

Minutes Taken and Transcribed By:

Gabrielle Severs - Court Stenographer

(The meeting was called to order at 11:45 a.m.)

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Good afternoon and welcome to everyone. I'm going to ask everybody to please rise as we welcome everybody to the committee on Veterans and Seniors, and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Judge Toomey.

(Salutation)

I'm going to ask everybody to 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)

Thank you. Again, it is my pleasure to welcome everybody here today at this very special meeting of the Veterans and Seniors Committee of the Suffolk County Legislature that we're holding here at Touro College Jacob D. Fuchsberg Law Center. We thank our hosts for having us here today. Thanks so much to Dean Rosenblum in particular for having us as your guests.

And we do have items on our agenda to go through today. I do, Mr. Clerk, have one card for public portion, and that is John Rago. John is with us today. John, I'm going to have you come up first and join us at the podium. And if there is anybody else that would like to address the committee as a part of our public portion, you are free to join us and then fill out a card and hand it to the Clerk; but, John, welcome to you.

MR. RAGO:

Thank you very much. I just want to say something today about the event that's coming up. As you know, I'm the outreach coordinator for Suffolk County United Veterans, specifically the supportive services for veteran families for the program, and when we do outreach, we go out and we ask other organizations to support us, to help us in our goals. We feel that we have an obligation to help other organizations with their goals and to assist them in what they're doing for our veterans.

So last January, Rich Dellasso, who works for the EOC -- worked very closely with Rich -- and I signed up for Project9Lines comedy workshop, and we went to a comedy school for a couple of months from January to March, and we performed to a sellout crowd at the VFW in Sayville, and we all had a great time doing it. It was to support a great organization, Project9Line, and we had so much fun that we are continuing. We're staying together as a group. We even have a name for ourselves. It's called the "Veterans Comedy Assault," and our next show, which I want to let everybody know about, is on October 10, and it's at the Hartigan Manor in Bethpage, and it's \$30, which includes the show and food, and only \$10 for veterans. So I just wanted to let everyone know about that and please pass the word. The venue holds about 300 people, and we like to sell out, so that's the only reason why I'm here today, is to let you know about this very special event. We plan on continuing this. It's just -- there's nothing like it anywhere else. It's a bunch of veterans that are doing stand-up and having a great time doing it. That's all I wanted to say, and thank you for the time.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. Thank you for being with us today, and, of course, thank you for all of the work that you do on behalf of our veterans and families.

Is there anybody else that would like to address the committee as a part of the public portion? Okay. Seeing none, we will then go to the agenda, and before we go to the agenda, let me

announce for the record that Legislators Krupski and Muratore will not be with us today. They have excused absences, but it is my pleasure to welcome the honorable John J. Toomey, Presiding Judge of the Suffolk County Veterans Court, who is sitting in with us today here on the committee. Judge, welcome to you.

We do have presentations today and we do have items on our legislative agenda today, but before we go to the prepared agenda, let me first ask the Honorable Judge Toomey to -- if there are some remarks that you are going to be making today, so let's have you go first, Judge.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Okay. Thank you very much, Legislator Stern, and thank you, certainly, for inviting me here and special thanks to Dean Rosenblum of Touro Law School and Touro Law School for allowing us to use this amazing facility this afternoon. Before I start, I just want to say one of the most valuable county employees in Suffolk County is Tom Ronayne, who does an excellent job for veterans all over the County. As you know, I am the Presiding Judge of the Veterans Court, and if it wasn't for the good work in the offices of Tom Ronayne, we would not have the success that we have today. Tom, I want to publicly thank you very much for everything that you do for the Veterans Court and for veterans in general.

Just briefly, though, the Veterans Court, it started at the end of 2010 when some of our political leaders, including Legislator Stern, saw that there was, I guess a number of veterans, a minority of veterans but still a significant minority of veterans coming back from different theaters with drug, alcohol, PTSD, traumatic brain injury, and these maladies were starting to have them intersect with our criminal justice system, and they noticed that there was a need for some type of segregated treatment, I guess, for lack of a better word for veterans, and the Presiding Judge, Administrative Judge of Suffolk County at the time -- he might be the only veteran that was a Judge -- asked me if I would start up the Veterans Court here in Suffolk County. At the time, there was only one other Veterans Court in, as far as I know, in all of New York State, maybe in the whole country, and we started up around 2010. I started seeing veterans come in in 2011.

Briefly, the Suffolk County Veterans Court is a treatment court. It's non-adversarial. The veterans come in, they sign a contract with their attorneys in the District Attorney's Office, and they take a plea to either a misdemeanor or a felony. If it's a misdemeanor, they will be placed in the Veterans Court for 12 months. If it's a felony, it will be 18 months. And while they're in the Veterans Court, they will have to go for drug treatment, alcohol treatment. They'll be tested, and they'll also be getting whatever they need as far as rehabilitation jobs or anything else they'll be getting through the good offices of the Veterans Administration.

We're blessed here in Suffolk County with Eric Bruno, who was here earlier, who is the liaison between myself and the court and the Veterans Administration. He's with me all the time. He's actually the one who sets up the treatment for the veterans, and he's just an unbelievable asset that we have here in Suffolk County, and he does a really, really good job with helping these veterans out.

Presently, we have an extremely successful court. I would say our success rate is about 95 percent. It's very high. Most of the veterans that come in, whatever problems they have, they address them. I think their biggest step, and I tell them when they come in, is the biggest step is that they're acknowledging that they have a problem. They're also asking for help, and our job, really, is to help them help themselves. There's a lot of people involved in the Veterans Court. I'll explain some of the people in a few moments, but mostly the ones who make it successful are the veterans themselves and the effort that they put in rehabilitating themselves.

In Suffolk County, we have a chapter of Vietnam Veterans of America. It's called Chapter 11. They serve as mentors in the Veterans Court. I invite you this Tuesday. We'll be in session if anybody wants to come to the Veterans Court right here in Central Islip in the District Court building. If you walk into my courtroom, and if you've ever been in a courtroom before in your life, this will be a little bit different. Half the room will be filled with guys about my age wearing green shirts and green jackets. They're all Vietnam veterans, and their purpose for being there, they are the mentors in the court. They mentor each and every veteran that comes into the court. Each veteran does have a mentor, and the mentors in the Veterans Court live by the creed of "Leave No Veteran Behind". I remember all too well 40 years ago when Vietnam veterans came home they weren't treated in same regard that we have -- that we are now treating veterans, and they remember that, and they live their motto of leaving no veteran behind, and I think any success that the court has, has to be in a large part to the mentors that we have there.

I've been a Judge and a lawyer for over 35 years, and I have to tell you, for me it's the most rewarding experience I've ever had in my professional life is watching veterans come in, get into a program, work that program, and then get their lives back on track. I mean, all the time people coming up to me or other mentors and stuff telling them how happy they are with their lives. Their wives will get in touch with us, their parents, and a lot of times, it's been a big change in their lives. They get the opportunity to lead very productive lives, and I'm certainly very proud to be the Presiding Judge in the Veterans Court. It's something -- I mean, I look at it not only as a job but also as an honor and a privilege.

We're also lucky with the District Attorney's Office that we have in Suffolk County, the gatekeeper, the person who allows the veterans to come into the Veterans Court is the District Attorney, and as we've grown, as we've gotten older and the court has been more established, we're getting a lot more serious cases. And there's a case that, actually, Tom Ronayne and also Dean Rosenblum are very, very instrumental in and I believe they're bringing him in on Tuesday, but a very serious case, a case that somebody's probably facing almost double digits, what we would call like 10 years in the State prison. It looks like he will get an opportunity -- he's suffering from PTSD, and he will get the opportunity to come into the Veterans Court. It's not a free pass by any means. When this individual comes in, he must abide by the contract that he enters into, and at the end, the negative part of the Veterans Court is that there is a breakout. I don't know what his breakout will be, but I imagine it would be lengthy, like probably could be up around 10 years, I have no idea. So if he doesn't do what he's supposed to do, he will get 10 years in State prison. So a lot of cases aren't that serious, but we're been very fortunate in getting the District Attorney to see the work that we can do, the work that the mentors do, the work that the Veterans Administration does, and how there is a way to put these people back on track, and that's what we try to do on a daily basis in the Veterans Court.

The other thing is in the Veterans Court, it's completely different. I never wear a robe when I come in. Usually, I'm sitting in the felony part out in Riverhead where most of my cases are murders and robberies and stuff like that. When I'm in Veterans Court, I'll never wear a robe. I'll talk to each veteran individually. I usually know all their names by sight. I usually know what branch of the service they're in, and Eric Bruno will tell me before we actually commence court how they're doing in their treatment program. It's very informal. They come right up to the bench. We shake hands, and it's a real feeling that we're there for them. We don't want them to fail; we want them to succeed as much as they want to succeed, and I think it's something that they feel. I'll tell each one when he comes in, you know, don't worry if you do drink, if you do drugs, we don't want you to but, you know it's understandable. I'm not going to throw you in jail right away. As long as you don't get rearrested, we can always up your treatment, we can do something, but we let them know at the beginning that we're here to help them. We're not here to "got you," you know, we got you on the drug test, we got you drinking or something like that.

So as I said, I'm extremely proud that I've had the opportunity to sit in this court, and it's been certainly the most fulfilling portion of my professional life. I don't know how much time we have, but if anybody has any questions here, I'll certainly be glad to answer them before I go on too long because I can talk forever on this. Anybody have any questions? Mr. Razer (ph), I'm sure you have something.

MR. RAZER:

Well, we went over a lot, Judge, and I plan to see you on Tuesday to learn more.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Okay. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Judge, I have a question for you, because I remember very well the day that it was opened, the Veterans Court, and I know a lot about the experiences that you've had and people that have come before you. And I'm just wondering -- I know it's been a very fulfilling experience for you personally -- I'm wondering if today, because a few years have gone by now, if the day-to-day operation of the court and the successes that we have are part of what you originally envisioned. Was it part of the original picture years ago, where we're at today, and then maybe give your thoughts on how you see it going forward.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Thank you very much, Legislator Stern. I guess one of the most gratifying parts of actually starting a court, having the opportunity to start a court, and there was no blueprint for it. Nobody told you what you are going to do, how you are going to do it, or what the result was going to be, so we started a thing from absolutely -- from nowhere and built it from there. I've been asked now -- a lot of times, I'll be asked to lecture or give a speech about the Veterans Court in Suffolk County in different parts of the country. The first thing they'll ask us is, "Where did you get the money? How did you deal with the Legislature?" and I'm looking at them like, "What money? There is no money." We're not going out there manufacturing criminals. These people are veterans that happen to be in trouble, and they're coming in here.

The Veterans Court costs no extra money to the State of New York or to the County of Suffolk. The only thing that we have in my courtroom that I wouldn't have normally would be a representative from the V.A., so it's something that actually just started and evolved by trial and error. I'm very happy that it got to the point where it does where we have the trust of the District Attorney's Office to allow serious criminals in where you know we'll be watching, we'll be monitoring, and we'll be mentoring them. And there's a credibility between us and the D.A.'s office, which I don't know if you ever envisioned it, but I'm certainly very grateful that we have it. And I never thought that the success rate of 95 percent I tell you -- the mentors keep track of it -- as far as we know, it's a 95 percent success rate of people who finish the treatment program. I mean, I don't know if everybody got hired, I don't know if they stayed hired, but it was certainly something that I didn't foresee.

If you're a veteran out there and you are in trouble, the resources that are out there now, certainly not just from the court, but from people like Tom Ronayne, Dean Rosenblum, and the V.A. itself. It's a very -- I got out of the Army. I spent two years in the Army. I was 18 to 20. I got out very young in 1968. I never used the V.A. at all in my entire life as a veteran. The first time I went there was on a tour when we started the Veterans Court. I was amazed at how good it is. I know it's an agency that, a lot of times discussing in different parts of the country, it's quite the lion, but as far as I can see, the asset of the V.A. Administration in Northport is a tremendous value to the veterans here, and they do a great job. And it's really eye opening for me how much these people care and what resources they have and what lengths they'll go to help veterans. If you're just

reading the papers and listening to television, you're definitely getting the wrong idea. I'm sorry I never used the Veterans Administration. I think it's really a very, very good organization. I hope that answered your question.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I know I speak for my colleagues when we say, first of all, thank you for your service to our country, we thank you for your service to our court system and our veterans and their family members, and congratulations. Certainly, congratulations on the 95 percent success rate is to be congratulated. But just as point out, Judge, just as importantly, and we certainly appreciate it in the Suffolk County Legislature and Suffolk County government because much of what we do has taken a leadership role, has set the pace for many situations over time, and I know my colleagues would agree, has set the pace for the rest of New York State and the rest of the nation, and this is certainly an important example of that. And, as you said, you started from scratch and it's a very successful program, so for that we are very appreciative.

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

I have a question. So I'm curious to find out, do you work with Judge Camacho with the Drug Court with our teens?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Actually, Judge Camacho is a good friend of mine, but we don't work together on that. He doesn't have the Drug Court part, but he does have Youth Court, and he's doing, you know, a very good job with the Youth Court. The veterans are mostly older than that, so I'm not sure but I believe in Judge Camacho's part the cutoff is probably 18 or 19 years of age, so they don't have any -- it is possible he could actually have -- because I think about it, to be honesty with you, the other day I was talking to him and he said he was sending me somebody over. I don't know if it was somebody in his Youth Court or if it was another that he had, but I will work with Judge Camacho. His treatment court is somewhat different than mine.

LEG. ANKER:

We have -- Suffolk Community College has programs to help bring our vets back into the workforce. Do you use the college? Do you use those resources to help some of the vets find work to get back on track?

JUDGE TOOMEY:

I don't know if we actually use Suffolk Community College. As you can see, there's so many agencies out there now to help veterans. It's wonderful. Usually what it will do is it will go through Eric Bruno and the Veterans Administration, and he'll channel -- before he uses Suffolk Community College, I really don't know, but it will be something that we keep in mind.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. Again, Judge, thank you. Thanks for being with us today. Of course we wish you every continued success.

JUDGE TOOMEY:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Holly.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I just have a couple of things very quickly. Legislators, in front of you today, it's 100 percent funding for the Health Insurance Counseling Assistance Program. It's to expand services. It's an additional \$18,000, and it is 100 percent funded so there's no match to the County for that, and the Health Insurance Counseling Program has really taken off since we moved it over to the Retired Senior Volunteer Program. They are doing a great job with it. They've expanded the number of volunteers they have, and they're all over the County doing a lot of the much-needed counseling. That's one of the biggest topics that we have that come into our office is health insurance, so I appreciate your support on that.

And just very quickly, our office is required each year to do public hearings on our programs, find out how people like the programs, if they need more of a particular service. Those hearings will be held October 27th at 10:30 in the morning at Tanner Park in Babylon at the Senior Center and also at the Town of Southold Senior Center on October 28th at 10:30 in the morning. So those are the two hearings we'll have this year.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Holly, the organization that's going to be receiving the grant funding, have they provided the services in the past?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

RSVP is the program provider, and they started with us about a year ago, and they are doing an outstanding job.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Anybody for Holly? Holly, thank you.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director Ronayne.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you, Chairman and Members; as always, thank you for the invitation. I'd like to begin by saying thank you and sharing my admiration for Judge Toomey and the fine work that he does on the Veterans Court. The court is really an extraordinary resource for us here in Suffolk County, and I have traveled the country, I have been to many places and watched the administration of the services to veterans, and I can tell you that what Judge Toomey is doing is unique, and I think it's fair to say that the results, the outcomes are fairly unique as well. The success is really very enviable on many levels. I could go on all day. He is just a truly extraordinary man. I thank him for his service. He's very humble when it comes to speaking of his own military service, but I can tell you that it was, while he might disagree publicly, he was fairly extraordinary. I admire him for that as well.

I know that today you are faced with a full agenda. You have a lot of material put before you, so I'll be as brief as I can. I'd also like to thank Dean Rosenblum for his invitation in allowing us to use this facility today. It's really delightful to be here.

The Suffolk County marathon and half marathon to support our veterans is probably at the top of my list of things to talk about. It was held recently and a terrific success. More than 3500 runners, the race was an outstanding example of how we can, intergovernmentally and working with our partners in the community, successfully produce events that benefit not only our veterans, which, in

my view, was the ultimate intent here, but really our entire community, and I think the success of our marathon could and should serve as an example for potentially future successful events across the board. It just really was inspiring to watch all the different levels of government and all the community partners work together. The program is an outstanding performance by all who participated.

As I said, I'll be very brief today because I know that you have a full program.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Well, I know that Legislator Anker shared this experience because we did have the opportunity to spend some time together at the marathon. When you're walking around, as we did, and you have the opportunity to speak with runners who had participated and vendors who had participated and sponsors who had participated, and just Suffolk County residents who had come out with their families to enjoy what turned out to be a spectacular day, you heard it from them. Winners that were coming up onto the podium, they were thanking you. "Thank you, thank you, thank you" was the theme of the day, not just because we were able to raise funds for a very worthy cause, not just because we were able to put on a successful marathon, a successful race, but most importantly just to put on a great day for Suffolk County, and so we heard that. We heard that firsthand from people who were coming up onto the dais, people who were out and about, that what a great job everybody had done and really had pulled together all of the coordinators, all of the volunteers, all of the participants. That was the consistent message that we heard firsthand, so it was really a great day for those who participated. Director, you participated and came over the finish line, I'm sure a very gratifying day, but to be a part of the first annual Suffolk County marathon was really a great day for everyone.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

We're excited. We anticipate that this will be the first of what will come to be many, many in the future, and we only improve from here. As successful as it was, we've already begun discussing how to make next year's event an even better experience.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

I also wanted to comment. It was an absolutely beautiful day. I think one to the most subtle components of the marathon was in the identification tags that were hanging by the stage, also dog tags -- I don't even like calling them dog tags -- but the identification tags of our veterans, and it made just a chiming sound in the wind as the ocean breeze blew on them. It was a wall of these tags, and it was just heart-wrenching to understand that there are people out there who have lost people in their lives that really made a difference, but it showed, the marathon showed how much of a difference that our veterans have made. And I think, again, that subtle component reminded people this is why we're here on that day, to recognize the men and women in our militaries. Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The display that you're referring to is a -- they were dog tags. There was one dog tag on that display representing each American service member who has lost their life in Iraq, Afghanistan, or associated theaters in the war on terror since 9/11, and there were 6,480 dog tags on that panel. I can tell you that over the past two years, we have had to add two strings to increase the numbers and those lines are now full, so we will have to, unfortunately, be adding another. And that display is owned by the Corporal Christopher Scherer Foundation, which is Team Chris. They are a Northport family whose son, Christopher Scherer, was a United States Marine who was killed in combat in 2007, July of 2007, and it serves as a very powerful reminder, so thank you for noticing

that and mentioning it.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director, today we're talking about an awful lot of things, and a lot of different subjects on how best to be an assistance to our veterans and their families, and unfortunately you and I, from time to time, have the unwelcome opportunity to discuss how certain of our veterans are doing, too many still with challenges. I'm wondering if you can bring us up-to-date on a few of the things that have happened most recently regarding veterans, and one of the subjects that we talk about too often is the rate of suicides among our service members. I'm wondering if you can bring us up-to-date on some of the things there.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, since we last met, since we last discussed this issue, we have had three Suffolk County residents take their own lives; none of those events occurred in Suffolk County, however. Two of the three soldiers or service members returned home. One went to Kentucky to be buried with his family. One was 22 years old, a young Marine, he took his own life with a firearm; another was a 28-year-old Army soldier with three deployments to Afghanistan. His death is the result of a single vehicle accident that is being investigated. No definitive outcome yet but it's been indicated to us how they anticipate the investigation will conclude. And there was a third veteran who had left a note and staying true to the note that he left behind. He committed suicide by cop, he engaged the police and forced the police to shoot and kill him.

This problem is not going away. This problem continues to plague us, and, again, largely with the help of people like Judge Toomey and with the help of people like Dean Rosenblum, who are working with us to work with the service members when we are able to identify them and provide some form of intervention whether it be traditional, whether it be other types of legal services, whether it be peer support and counseling, whatever the support services may be. It is an extraordinary level of support that we have and that we're able to engage here in Suffolk County, and for all of the sadness and all the tragedy that surrounds the unsuccessful outcomes, the veterans that we lose, I think it's very important for us all to bear in mind that one of the intangibles that we deal with on a regular basis is that we cannot quantify our successes. We don't know with certain people, what veterans, through the interventions that we have been able to be a part of, what effect those interventions may have had and what veterans may or may not have acted in another way, so we don't know conclusively what the results or what the true successes are, but we know that they exist.

I don't know if I reported this at our last committee, but I should also report to you that we did, in fact, have a Narcan save. We had one of the Joseph Dwyer team members who was trained and certified to use Narcan through our program had a save, successfully revived a veteran who had taken an opiate overdose, a heroin overdose, and that veteran is in the long-term residential treatment program today, so there are many, many successes. I don't want to lose sight of those when we talk about the tragedy. It's important that we acknowledge both, I believe.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. Anybody else for the Director? Director, as always, thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Let me invite Ken Rosenblum to join us, who is not only our host today for the Veterans and Seniors Committee meeting here, but is also the Director of the Service Members Assistance Clinic here at Touro Law School.

DEAN ROSENBLUM:

Thank you very much for the time. I just wanted to take a couple of minutes to explain what else is going on here today that's kind of a wraparound for the committee meeting. I know this is going to sound like a mutual admiration society, but it's true and genuine. Thanks to Legislator Stern's inspiration, we convened this morning the first-ever meeting of Nassau and Suffolk County groups and organizations that provide legal services to veterans with a view toward identifying what services are now available under what conditions, what groups handle what kind of cases: Is it pro bono, low bono, for charge? Is it direct service? Is it referral? Is it limited to particular types of cases? And we've got -- I counted the number of groups. We've got over 20 people representing different groups that provide legal services to veterans, and what we're going to try to do is identify overlap, identify unmet needs so we can make recommendations to our associations and other groups about how we might better meet the unmet legal needs of veterans, and ultimately come up with a directory that can be provided to veterans: legal assistance groups, other groups serving veterans both public and private, so that when you get a constituent in your office who needs a discharge upgrade in Nassau County, okay, I know that goes over here; needs a child support modification in Suffolk County, okay, we can do that over here; so that everyone will have a comprehensive and up-to-date directory of exactly who in this, thankfully growing, universe is providing legal services to veterans in Nassau and Suffolk County. And I thank all of you, particularly Legislator Stern. By the way, we will be continuing after the meeting. You're all invited to stay for lunch. You're all invited to stay for lunch, and we're going to reconvene and finish up the meeting consisting of presentations by groups we didn't get to in the morning session and then discussions to further identify the unmet needs and make a plan for going forward so we can continue to communicate with these groups. Thank you for your support at this effort.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And thank you again for being such a gracious host to the committee today and for having us, but most importantly for this important effort, because I know that you taking the lead and bringing all the different professionals together and developing this type of a resource is going to be most useful for us, for myself, my colleagues, for the Director. We are in many, many cases, literally on the frontline, and so the initial outreach effort might come through our offices, and so to have these resources to be able to best direct veterans and family members where to go to get the best assistance is critically important, so thank you.

I'm going to ask Ben Pomerance to join us today. Ben is the Deputy Director of Veterans Programs for the State of New York's Division of Veterans' Affairs, a very important resource for us here on the local level and throughout New York State. So, Ben, thank you for being with us today.

MR. POMERANCE:

Thank you. Good morning -- good afternoon I guess. It's an honor to be here to address your committee, which is well-known to us in Albany, the work that it does. It's no secret that the county-level support for veterans and their families is vital so that programs are carried out, initiatives are started and seen to completion, and it's not equal with every county in the state. It's well-known that this is one of the counties that is truly engaged in having great success in this realm, so thank you for the work that your committee does, in particular with the area of looking at housing and looking at clarifying in the Human Rights Law that the term "military status" refers not only to those in active duty and in the reserves, but also to veterans as well. A tremendous initiative, and we're very glad that you were able to see that through.

A couple of things our agency is involved with that's coming up in this area that I'll bring to your attention. First of all, our organization works with New York State's veterans and their families throughout the entire state, so one of our goals in the agency is to get beyond the walls of our central office in Albany and to get out more into communities and speak with veterans and their families and get a sense of what that issues are, what's being done right, what needs to be improved

upon, what initiatives should we try and urge forward as best we can. And so in that regard is you were having a series of 11 community conversations throughout every region in the state, and they're free-flowing dialogues. They're open to anybody who wishes to attend and take part in them. We're about halfway through at this point. They've been very successful thus far, given us lots of ideas, and plenty of grist for the mill of what we should be doing for veterans going forward.

We're going to be at SUNY Stony Brook on October 14th beginning at 10:30 a.m., and I'd like to personally invite all of you and everyone here to come to this program and to let your opinions be known and let your voices be heard. It's a program where we talk very little and we listen a lot. We kind of get the dialogue going, and then once the dialogue starts, we step back and let the conversation unfold. And so please, as individuals who certainly are very active in this area in Suffolk County, please do come and tell us what's been going on, and tell us, more importantly, what you think should be going on at the state level to help make the lives of veterans and their families in your region better.

Also, on October 30th, there's going to be a conference across the pond at St. John's School of Law focusing on consumer protection issues for veterans that Ken is going to be speaking at that, as well as a couple of the nation's expert attorneys in that particular realm, talking about everything from foreclosure issues to Chapter 7 bankruptcy cases. It's common things where veterans present with problems and they need attorneys to provide the right solutions and exercise the right provisions of law to make that happen. It's a collaboration between our division and St. John's School of Law to make that happen.

Also coming up in November, the week after Veterans Day we're having three roundtable discussions focusing on veterans' treatment courts and looking at best practices, what's being done now, what standards, if any, are good things to have adopted among the veteran treatment courts of New York State, and so the first one of those is going to be taking place on the 16th of November in Albany. There's one in Rochester on the 18th, and then most pertinent to this group, the 20th of November in New York City.

A couple of other brief things that won't take too much more of your time. Our division has compiled a booklet which is lengthy. It's about 145 pages long at this point, which encompasses virtually every State statute that directly affects veterans and their families. And for the work that you do, I'm happy to send copies of this either by mail or by e-mail, whatever you prefer, to each of you -- just let me know afterward if you'd like and how many you would like -- to get a sense of what the current state of affairs is throughout New York State, be it in the consumer protection realm, be it in the family law realm, be it in the tax exemption realm. There's multiple facets included here as far as the standard of law for veterans and their families. They might give you some ideas for some of your initiatives going forward.

Now a couple of State initiatives I'll touch on very briefly. First of all, anybody who has received a New York State driver's license, learner's permit, or non-driver's ID which has the veteran's status designation on it, in the beginning, DMV was charging a \$12.50 fee for that designation. That fee is gone now, and DMV is offering refunds to any veteran who was charged the \$12.50 previously. So they have a list. They've been sending out refunds now for a couple of weeks to veterans whom they had in their databases, but if you come across any veterans who paid the \$12.50 for it and have not received a refund yet from DMV, please do contact the DMV in Albany or contact our office. We'll make sure they get that refund.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Can I ask you, how are veterans being advised of that?

MR. POMERANCE:

DMV is putting out materials through their different regional office locations. We have materials, too, through our Division of Veterans' Affairs field offices.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

So they would just have to see it advertised in the offices? Are they getting anything directly sent to them either through mail or --

MR. POMERANCE:

Well, a lot of veterans are receiving the refund check directly through the mail if they're in the DMV system, but I mentioned it just in case so that veterans who may have fallen through the cracks inadvertently in that system and have not received their refund check yet from DMV, they are entitled to that refund, and they definitely should make that known if they haven't received it by now.

Also for the real property tax exemption realm, there is a recent increase in the eligible funds tax exemption from \$5,000 to \$7500. It's a bit of a challenge for veterans in the sense that they're not being required to reapply for the exemption, but what they are being asked to do is to go to see their local assessor and just tell the local assessor that they believe that they're entitled to the upgrade from 5,000 to 7500. Once they tell the assessor that, the burden shifts to the assessor to go back, pull the veteran's original application, reconstruct the materials, and make the determination if there was enough money used in eligible funds by the veteran at the time of the veteran's initial application for the exemption to get the \$7,500 exemption as opposed to the \$5,000 exemption. So, again, please let that be known to any veterans whom you come across. The property tax questions, we're making known through all of our chairmen as well as is the State Department of Tax and Finance.

And then lastly an update of an initiative that began, actually, last year. It's a Governor's initiative called "Strike Force." What this initiative did was announce last year at the Governor's Summit for Veterans and Military Families, it took teams of State employees and embedded them inside the two V.A. regional offices here in New York City and over in Buffalo. And the focus was to look at all of the backlogged claims for disability compensation and for pension in those offices and to have these New York State employees, the Strike Force employees, focus their attention on working with those backlogged claims and figuring out why it hadn't been attended to, figuring out what additional evidence needed to be gathered, determining if they were ready for a rating decision from the V.A. and so on. And I'm pleased to report that this is a little bit more than a year old now and it has contributed significantly to reducing the backlog at both the V.A. regional offices.

What we're doing now at the invitation of the New York City V.A. regional office is we're working out an agreement that will hopefully be solidified in next month or so to take a Strike Force team there and focus their attention, now that the claims backlog has been reduced so substantially, focus their attention on the growing problem of backlogged appeals, because it's no secret that nationwide the next big backlog issue is in the appeals realm. So we're going to be taking that team and we're getting trained from the V.A. on how to work with the appeals properly, and they're going to be attacking the backlogged appeals as the next phase, kind of a Strike Force phase II, if you will. We're looking at a six-month program with the option to extend beyond that if necessary to keep the backlog down in the appeals realm.

That's all that I have. I've taken a lot of your time already, but I'm happy to stand for any questions that any of you have.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Well, that is certainly good news on the Strike Force assistance. Legislator Barraga.

LEG. BARRAGA:

You may not know this, but I'm going to ask a couple questions.

MR. POMERANCE:

Sure.

LEG. BARRAGA:

At the State of New York level, the State Department of Veterans Affairs, what is the budget in that department?

MR. POMERANCE:

I don't know the exact numbers offhand, but I can certainly get them for you when I get back to Albany next week.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Yeah, because I don't think they really have much of a budget. I think their budget is maybe \$9 or \$10 million. What is the title of the person who heads that department?

MR. POMERANCE:

It's our Director. His name is Eric Hesse.

LEG. BARRAGA:

It really hasn't changed since I was there, because when you take a look at this country, we've been through two wars, and there's many challenges we face with veterans coming back to New York State. I think Andrew Cuomo should be sending the right message out to veterans in the State of New York by elevating that department and putting a commissioner in charge of the Department of Veterans Affairs, not a Director. When you put a Director in there, that's inclined to be a smaller department, a much smaller department. You have to raise that position up for the benefit of the veterans in this State to commissioner status. Get a commissioner running that department and give you an appropriate budget. That sends the right message to everyone in the State of New York. Right now, a Director -- I'm not even sure it's an independent agency. Maybe under some other commissioner status.

MR. POMERANCE:

It's independent.

LEG. BARRAGA:

All right. But it's a small budget, Director status. It should get a larger budget. Even if you can't increase the budget, put the head of it on a commissioner basis, like they have other commissioners for other agencies, and for too long now it's been subordinated, and it seems obvious what the Governor should be doing and he hasn't done it. Maybe it just hasn't called his attention. It's just a suggestion. I think you want to send the right message. You can have all these different programs and agencies, but the reality is it's a rather small department, a Director runs it. That shouldn't be the case after 10 years of war.

MR. POMERANCE:

You know, it's definitely a topic that if you'd like to write to the Governor's office about it, I think it's worth bringing up as an issue.

LEG. BARRAGA:

I can write, but I know Assemblypersons and Senators who would agree with that statement, that it should be at the commissioner level, and it isn't in New York State for some reason. Maybe you could bring the message back to the Governor the next time you see him.

MR. POMERANCE:

That's kind of beyond the hands of our office itself, but it's definitely worth --

LEG. BARRAGA:

Well, you just said to me you are going to hold these hearings in the future, you want input from different groups.

MR. POMERANCE:

Yes.

LEG. BARRAGA:

You're getting input from me. As a County legislator, a former Assemblyperson, there's something not quite right with that system up there.

MR. POMERANCE:

I think it's definitely something that's worth looking at, and I recommend definitely pushing that along to contacting the Governor's office directly and saying that you think this needs to be done.

LEG. BARRAGA:

I can do that, but maybe you should do it as well.

MR. POMERANCE:

Yeah.

LEG. BARRAGA:

All right. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

I also want to put on your radar the issue of school districts and military families. I'm working with some constituents right now to see if we can start a military PTA. What the problem is, schools don't know if those families are military. They're not supposed to know; it's confidential, but unfortunately, the family has more stress than just the typical family that is not military, so if there's something that you can do to help with those families. A parent may be away on active duty, the child may be going through some stress, there are financial issues. And what you had talked about before, it sounds like you're addressing some of those issues, but it is an issue here on Long Island and as the Chair of Education and talking with many constituents and school districts, it's something you need to address.

The other important priority for us is the issue of homeless vets. So in Middle Island, in Coram, Ridge, we have quite a few veterans living in tents along New York State Route 25, and we're going to be addressing that, continuing the conversation with our vets Director. But the Coram Civic, the Middle Island Civic, they have concerns, and if there's something you can do to help us address that, it would be greatly appreciated.

MR. POMERANCE:

Sure. Both are very important issues, obviously. The topic of schools working with military families and military children in particular, last year New York State signed on to become a part of the Interstate Compact on educational opportunity for military children, so there is an increased effort in that to make certain that transitions among school districts happen properly as families move from place to place, to make certain that there are no exclusions from school activities, be it

school sports or school clubs or whatever, make sure the records are transferred properly from place to place and things of that nature.

The Interstate Compact is a significant set of laws, which are actually codified within the State Education Law now as being, you know, part of New York State law, and efforts are ongoing throughout every school district in the state to make certain that those measures are complied with, but it remains a very important issue and definitely something that's on our radar.

And then the other topic you brought up, the homeless veterans, of course, is and remains very much on our radar, and there's a lot of work that is being done and is going to be done in the future to continue to address that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

All right. Thank you. Thank you for being with us today.

MR. POMERANCE:

Thank you very much.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay.

Next on our agenda is Introductory Resolution **1681, Accepting and appropriating 100% reimbursable Grant funds from the New York State Office for Aging (County Executive)**. This is the grant for the education purposes that the Director had spoken about earlier during her comments. I will make a motion to approve and place on the consent calendar. Second by Legislator Barraga. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? **IR 1681 is approved and placed on the consent calendar (VOTE: 3-2-0-0, Excused: Legislators Muratore and Krupski)**

IR 1740, Establishing an advisory committee to evaluate and recommend recipients for the disbursement of funds received by the County from the Suffolk County Marathon and Half Marathon for veterans event (County Executive). This is legislation that is before us that was submitted with a list of potential members to make up as part of a committee. I'm told that is under review, so I'm going to make a motion to table. Second by Legislator Barraga. Everybody good? All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? **IR 1740 is tabled (VOTE: 3-2-0-0, Excused: Legislators Muratore and Krupski)**

IR 1742, Creating a program for commemorative pins to honor our Volunteer Firefighters and Emergency Medical Services Volunteers who have also served in the Armed Forces of the United States (Browning).

MS. SIMPSON:

Legislator?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Counsel.

MS. SIMPSON:

This is an amended copy. I believe a copy was distributed to each of the Legislators. It was amended earlier this morning. Instead of creating a program and designing a pin, we will be using Nassau County's pin pursuant to the amended and producing them with funding from the Legislature.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

So funding comes from the Legislative budget.

MS. SIMPSON:

Yes. Funding is pending in the 2016 Operating Budget.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. I don't have a financial impact statement. Was there one that was prepared for the amended version?

LEG. ANKER:

I think it was e-mailed to us, but I don't see a financial number on that. I would like a little bit more information on the financial number on that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Who do we talk to from Budget; anyone? Okay. So this is the financial impact upon the proposed resolution and I'm assuming that it's the same on the amended version.

MR. TARANTOWICZ:

This is the fiscal on the amended version.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

This is the fiscal on the amended version?

MR. TARANTOWICZ:

Yeah, that's the fiscal for the amended version.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. So, Andrew, what I'm seeing here is that it's stating that there's no additional fiscal impact in the 2015 Operating Budget. Appropriations are to be covered by the Legislature in the 2016 Operating Budget. So this is for 2016?

MR. TARANTOWICZ:

Yes.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And it states that there's no fiscal impact in the 2015 Operating Budget, so it's really just for 2016. So it says what the source of the funding is going to be, and that's the Legislative budget, but it doesn't have a corresponding number.

MR. TARANTOWICZ:

Yeah. So basically the recommended just came out for 2016 so I think it's going to be addressed in the Working Group.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

So it's going to be a Working Group item, but at this point we don't have any idea as to what that dollar amount is going to be?

MS. SIMPSON:

If I may, I was informed this morning that it was in the \$2500 range. It's a very small amount.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

So my question is not so much the dollar amount and whether it's significant or insignificant. I

think we can all agree that it is an acceptable number. My concern is that there is no number made up as a part of the financial impact statement, which, procedurally, is required. I understand that the conversation is going to come as a part of the Working Group. I understand that it is slated for the 2016 budget. I guess the question, really, is for Counsel, and whether or not it is eligible for a vote without a corresponding dollar amount.

MS. SIMPSON:

I'm of the opinion that it's eligible for a vote, but if you feel more comfortable discharging, that is also an option.

LEG. ANKER:

Why can't we table it for a cycle until we get that additional information? Table it for a cycle until we get the numbers?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

You know, I would probably -- I'm going to recommend, and I'll make the motion to discharge without recommendation, as our Counsel is saying that it is procedurally eligible to do so, and I would just ask that the sponsor work with our budget office to get that dollar figure so that we can make it part of the fiscal impact statement. I understand that that's not a determination that we've made yet, that it's going to be part of the Working Group. I don't mind that, but I think it would be important that there be some estimate from a dollar perspective as to what the cost is going to be, and if we can get that made part of the fiscal impact so that by the time we have it before us in the general session, that we'll have a dollar amount that goes along with that. So I'd be comfortable with a motion to discharge without recommendation so that if we can get it before the Legislature, but let's see if we can get that corresponding number with it as well.

LEG. BARRAGA:

Motion.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Barraga will make that motion. I'll second. I'll call the vote. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstention? **IR 1742 is discharged without recommendation (VOTE: 3-2-0-0, Excused: Legislators Krupski and Muratore)**

Again, thank you to Touro Law School for having us. There being no other business before the committee, we are adjourned.

(The meeting was adjourned at 12:45 p.m.)