

VETERANS & SENIORS COMMITTEE

OF THE

SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE

MINUTES

A meeting of the Veterans & 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 held on November 9, 2015.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Legislator Steven H. Stern - Chairperson
Legislator Thomas F. Barraga - Vice Chair
Legislator Sarah S. Anker
Legislator Al Krupski
Legislator Thomas Muratore

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Sarah Simpson - Assistant Counsel to the Legislature
Jason Richberg - Clerk of the Legislature
Andrew Tarantowicz - Budget Review Office
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director/Office for the Aging
Katie Horst - County Executive's Office
Lisa Santeramo - County Executive's Office
Deborah Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern
Amy Ellis - Aide to Legislator Anker
Catherine Stark - Aide to Legislator Krupski
Brendan Chamberlain - Aide to Legislator Muratore
William Shilling - Aide to Legislator Calarco
Rick Brand - Newsday
Lynne Bizzaro - County Attorney's Office
Kathy Malloy - AME
John Cooney - Northport American Legion
And All Other Interested Parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Diana Flesher - Court Stenographer

MINUTES TRANSCRIBED BY:

Kim Castiglione - Legislative Secretary

(*THE MEETING WAS CALLED TO ORDER AT 12:43 PM*)

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

All right. Good afternoon, everyone. Welcome to the committee on Veterans and Seniors. I'm going to ask everybody to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Barraga.

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, welcome everybody, and thank you for joining us. Let's see. First on our agenda today, public portion. Mr. Clerk, I don't see that I have any cards.

MR. RICHBERG:

No cards, Mr. Chair.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

No cards. Thank you. Okay. Is there anybody here with us this afternoon who would like to address the committee? Mr. Cooney.

MR. COONEY:

Sorry about not filling out the card. Thank you, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee. My name is John Cooney. I'm a Commander of the Northport American Legion and also one of the primary authors, our organization, with the Resolution 109-2014 that you're going to get a report about today as well. I just wanted to cover a couple of matters with you, including the progress of that law and the enforcement of that law. Again, thank you to Chairman Stern, who was one of the cosponsors, along with Doc Spencer as well, to bring more financial clarity to our communities so that we can make sure that the funds donated for those intended, our veterans and family, go to that purpose.

We had a number of different metrics and reporting that were amendments under the law. I reviewed the Suffolk County Veterans Services Agency website recently. Some metrics are there, but we're still missing quite a bit, so we need to work towards getting those additional metrics reported, such as the amount that remains undistributed by the charity, the line item breakdown of the programs, the veterans programs/other charities, that receive donations. But there's a total of about six metrics in the law and it looks like about three of them are being reported on and a couple of them might be jumbled. I have been speaking with Mr. Ronayne. I will follow-up with him as well, but we just need to make sure that the public has the information necessary in order to make an informed decision.

In addition to that, it looks like some of the percentages don't make sense because we're trying to show the community if an organization raised \$100,000 and only 20,000 went to Suffolk County veterans or programs, then that number should be 20%. But those numbers are supposed to be supplied by the Office of the Comptroller and I'm not sure if they are yet, so that's another thing that we need to look into.

In addition to the metrics and reporting, one of the big issues is we need to make sure that the law is being enforced in terms of organizations not being allowed to solicit. It is a prohibited act under the law not being allowed to solicit until they obtain permits. Everybody wants to trust the

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organizations that they're doing the right thing and that they have the best intentions in mind, but the law is there for a reason. Number one, to be registered, and then number two, to track the financials going forward.

We recently ran into a problem over the last year. There is a group called the Fairway Foundation, which Suffolk County endorsed and partnered with, which was supposed to encompass two home giveaways, mortgage free homes in all the literature and promotions, giveaways to our veterans. It turns out -- and we're one of the organizations that supported them as well. But it turns out after we read the fine print, that they weren't two home giveaways. It was a three year lease program and the veteran and his family could be evicted from the property if they got divorced, if they didn't make certain repairs, and if they didn't enter a financial mentoring program. We thought that was completely wrong, a bait and switch with the community. A home giveaway is a home giveaway.

We give a lot of credit to Mr. Ronayne. As soon as I raised that issue to him in the paperwork, he immediately started looking into them. And from what I understand now, Suffolk County is no longer partners with them at all. Okay. But the problem is money was raised for that intended purpose starting in June, 2014, until the Suffolk County Veterans Services Agency sent them a cease and desist letter this past summer. So for a year at least \$22,000, from what I can tell from the reporting on the website, the Suffolk County website, \$22,000 was raised from the community with Suffolk County's endorsement for two home giveaways. Our position is that money should be returned to Suffolk County. That money should be returned to Suffolk County because that money was intended for two home giveaways, renovations for veterans, and Suffolk County Services Agency or Suffolk County as a whole can get that money and do what was intended.

In addition, there should be a notice that goes out when the divorce happens with a group such as this so that the public is aware and previous endorsements by Suffolk County or other officials are not used to then propagate the same thing over again.

And finally, the last thing I just want to address is within the law itself we have a number of organizations that either have expired permits or they're still up for renewal and it says partial submission. If it's expired or partial submission, then they cannot still be allowed to continue to fundraise. I'm still getting letters. The website's Wounded Warrior Project is one of them. It says that their certificate has expired as of -- it was just updated in October, but their certificate expired and they haven't submitted the new paperwork. Then we have to enforce that. They shouldn't be allowed to continue. The whole purpose of this law is to bring the financial transparency to the community, because Suffolk County is one of the largest areas per capita of veterans in the world. And we do a great job. We thank you for everything that you do in staying on top of this and we appreciate it. Thank you for having me today.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Thank you. Is there anybody else who would like to address the committee? Seeing none, Holly.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

I know it's that time of year where you hear about the different programs that are important to the seniors, the one being the open enrollment for the Medicare, Prescription Part D, that program, open enrollment is through December 7th. We have quite a number of seniors who were being disenrolled from one of their programs, so the Retired Senior Volunteer Program, the health insurance counseling program that we contract with, RSVP, they've added phone lines, they've extended hours, they're out at more libraries to meet with seniors one on one, and our office has been taking calls like we usually do as well, and it's been pretty busy on the phones. But people are asking the questions.

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I just encourage all of you, when you're talking to older residents, please tell them to look at their health insurance. It's very important they do it because otherwise they are stuck with what they have for another year and it may not meet their needs. I just can't emphasize that enough, that if you're out there let them know they should be doing that. And they can call our office, they can call the retired Senior Volunteer Program line.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Holly, is there something that your office is making available to remind seniors and their families that it's important to give it a look?

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

We went out to the public hearings and that was something else I was going to talk about. We did our public hearings for our four year plan. We were out in Mattituck for the one and we were in Babylon for the other. We saw roughly 150, 160 people there and we let them know, and we have information on our website that, you know, it's open enrollment period, so we're trying to let people know. And, you know, our sites all know that it's going on. You know, we're happy to answer any questions they have on that. So that's the one program.

The other one is the HEAP Program opens next Monday. The early mail out was done by the State at the end of August. The applications are coming in slow. It's been that trend for the last three to four years. Some of that has to do with the fact that if people are on food stamps they're automatically enrolled, so that decreased the number of people, but we're also seeing it's pretty slow and I think it might have to do with the fact that it's been so warm. You know, I think people just aren't really thinking about it. But that program traditionally stays open at least until mid-March or until the money runs out, so that's another program. I think we sent letters out to all the offices, but if you need more information I've got some of the letters that we sent out, the Dear Colleague letters. It has information on the HEAP Program if you need those. So that's the second program that's out there that, you know, we encourage you to tell people about. That's a benefit that's really, you know, they get it, it's a one-time benefit, but it saves them a little extra money they could spend on something else. And the oil, I mean the Heating Equipment Repair/Replacement Program opened today, and you have to be HEAP eligible for that. You can, if you're eligible, get up to \$6500 towards the replacement of home heating equipment. So that's another program that's out there, but that one will probably end a lot quicker than the regular HEAP Program. So if you know of people that have a faulty burner that they've been trying to figure out how to keep it going, you know, and they're HEAP eligible, they may be able to get some assistance.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Holly, do you recall at the end of the year how many total HEAP participants there were?

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

You know, last year I think it was about 4,000. We've traditionally -- the last couple of years we went from over six to, you know, just over five and now over four, so it's been decreasing over the last couple of years. So those programs are out there. We did do the public hearings. They were pretty well attended. Overwhelming the people who have been to them they like the services they're receiving, they're pretty happy with the senior centers. They can't say enough about the people that are running them. You know, transportation seems to be an issue as always. They'd like a little more transportation, but that, I think, is for every resident of the County. It just is what it is. But overall they went pretty well.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Good. Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

Hi, Holly. I have a question. You were talking about the insurance. And, you know, is it Health Republic basically? How is that affecting the seniors? I'm just curious.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

There are some seniors, but I think Health Republic, that's a different program. Most of the programs that we saw the difference I think it was Empire that ran out of Suffolk County with one of their programs and it's 24,000 seniors that were affected by that in Suffolk County. So they have to pick another plan and that's why the phones have been crazy for the HIICAP Program and for our office.

LEG. ANKER:

So it's different health insurance.

DIRECTOR RHODES-TEAGUE:

Yes, there was one plan that really we took a beating in Suffolk over when they pulled out.

LEG. ANKER:

Thank you.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

Okay. Holly, thank you. Okay. Next on the agenda, I'm going to, I guess, ask the Administration.

MS. SANTERAMO:

Good afternoon. We apologize on behalf of Director Ronayne that he was unable to be here today, but we did print out and hand you -- the report should be in your possession now. He will be there -- he will be here in two weeks to answer any questions that you may have.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

All right. Thank you. So according to the law that the Legislature had passed, part of the requirement was for a report, and then that report to be submitted to this committee for our review. So today we are in receipt of that report submitted by the Administration, Director Ronayne's report, and that he will make himself available at our next committee meeting. We're on a short cycle so it will be two weeks. So I suppose positively for my colleagues here on the committee that will give us the opportunity to review the Director's report that's being submitted here today. It will help us develop questions of the Director so that when he is with us in two weeks we'll have the opportunity to ask him all of the questions that we would like about the report that's being submitted.

I don't see it being reflected here anywhere, but one of the other requirements in creating and submitting the report is that the information be made public online. I am told that that is up and available for anybody in the public to have the opportunity to review that as well. Okay? So we'll welcome Director Ronayne in two weeks and we'll continue our conversation about the support -- the report that's being submitted here today. Is everybody good? Okay. Very good.

TABLED RESOLUTIONS

With that then, we'll go to tabled resolution ***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 (Co. Exec.)***.

This had been tabled. I know that there were discussions with the Administration. Is there anybody here that wants to comment on it?

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MS. SANTERAMO:

We had amended this resolution from the original version that was submitted. We added three reps from Gold Star Families and three reps from Suffolk County elected officials who are veterans. So, for instance, Senator Croci is a veteran. He represents Suffolk County. I presume he might be one of the reps that the County Executive would want to ask.

CHAIRPERSON STERN:

All right. Thank you. Everybody good with the changes? Okay. I will make a motion to approve. Second by Legislator Barraga. All in favor? Any opposed? Any abstentions? **IR 1740 is approved. (VOTE: 5-0-0-0).** Very good. There being no other business before the committee, we are adjourned.

(*THE MEETING CONCLUDED AT 12:58 PM*)