

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 23, 2015 at 12:30 p.m.

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Legislator Steven H. Stern - Chairperson
Legislator Sarah S. Anker
Legislator Al Krupski
Legislator Thomas Muratore

MEMBER NOT PRESENT:

Legislator Thomas F. Barraga - Excused Absence

ALSO IN ATTENDANCE:

Jason Richberg - Clerk/Suffolk County Legislature
Tom Ronayne - Director/Veterans Service Agency
Holly Rhodes-Teague - Director/Office for the Aging
Debbie Harris - Aide to Legislator Stern
Catherine Stark - Aide to Legislator Krupski
Amy Ellis - Aide to Legislator Anker
Katie Horst - County Executive's Office
Rosemarie Kluepfel - Fairway Foundation
John Cooney - American Legion
All Other Interested Parties

MINUTES TAKEN BY:

Gabrielle Severs - Court Stenographer

MINUTES TRANSCRIBED BY:

Kim Castiglione - Legislative Secretary

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

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Good afternoon everyone and welcome to the committee on Veterans and Seniors. I'm going to ask you to please rise and join us in the Pledge of Allegiance led by Legislator Anker.

Salutation

I'm going to ask everybody to please remain standing as we take a moment of silence to keep all of our brave men and women fighting for our freedoms overseas in our thoughts and prayers.

Moment of Silence Observed

Thank you. Okay. Again, welcome everybody and thank you for joining us this afternoon. First, let me note for the record that Legislator Barraga will not be with us today. He has an excused absence. Mr. Clerk, I have cards here. Let's see, the first card that I have is Mr. John Cooney. Mr. Cooney, welcome.

MR. COONEY:

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and committee members. John Cooney, Northport.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Just to let anybody that's going to be speaking today as part of Public Portion knows that we have about three minutes.

MR. COONEY:

I'm here today to comment on the Not-For-Profit Certification Program through the Suffolk County Veterans Services Agency. We reviewed the current report, which was handed out to this committee last week, or I should say two weeks ago. There's a number of problems with the report, some things we wanted to bring to your attention. I've tried to meet with Mr. Ronayne. I'm sure we'll meet soon, too, but while it's before the committee we should go over some things.

For instance, the law requires not-for-profits providing support and raising money for vets to get a permit. There are a number of not-for-profits that don't even exist on this report. For instance, Beacon House, VetDogs, Suffolk County United Vets. The law also requires that the Comptroller provide metrics for public dissemination. It's not clear whether the Comptroller's providing those metrics or Mr. Ronayne's doing the math themselves. Some of the math is off in terms of percentages and what's donated. There is also metrics missing, metrics that, according to the law, are supposed to be for public dissemination and only a couple of them are there. Other ones are missing.

In addition, I mentioned not-for-profits not having a permit before their fundraising. We seem to be following a pattern of having not-for-profits that are raising money in Suffolk County, and either they've never been asked to have a permit in the first place, or now they're catching up. For instance, Hope for the Warriors just did a huge race out here in Suffolk County. They did a race in Suffolk County also in 2014. They didn't have a permit, even though they were endorsed by Suffolk County in 2014. They raised over \$170,000, and according to the most recent report from Mr. Ronayne's office, zero dollars went to Suffolk County. So 170 grand was raised, Suffolk County in 2014, zero went. Now, they just had another race in 2015. I don't know how much is going out of that, if anything, as well. But when I look down the list I see zero, zero, \$500 out of \$21,000. You know, these are all very low percentages.

We've also got two-thirds don't even have permits yet, and then we have entities on here as well, such as the Wounded Warrior Project, a big national not-for-profit as well. Their permit expired. They haven't submitted anything since April, 2015. It says expired, but yet they're still holding fundraisers throughout Suffolk County. So has a cease and desist letter gone out? You know, what are the ramifications? This is supposed to be to provide a permit process so then there's transparency to the public and a way to track. We need the full metrics under the law, we need the Comptroller involved and we need that these entities are held accountable. But right now things are going awry and we'd like these things fixed so we can bring this and make sure those who deserve it in our Suffolk County, and we have a large number of struggling veterans, actually benefit. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. Rosemarie Kluepfel. Rosemarie, welcome.

MS. KLUEPFEL:

Thank you, Legislators. The reason I'm here is because at the last meeting John Cooney also spoke, and one thing we do agree on, it is definitely there is issues with the registry and the not-for-profit cooperation.

Fairway Foundation is proud to say that we're one of the few, very few, organizations that have applied and been approved by the Comptroller. And I believe there's only seven last I checked in the entire County, which is disturbing, because we were sent cease and desist letters and very harsh e-mails from Tom Ronayne, the Director of Suffolk County Veterans Services, and I cannot believe that other organizations would continue to fundraise after we were threatened by the County Attorney. And our application was actually already in and approved by the County Comptroller, he said the second of the applications. So while our application was actually in and approved by the County Comptroller, we were being harassed not to fundraise and that other organizations are still fundraising today with no permit. So we do agree on that issue with Commander Cooney.

Commander Cooney did raise the Fairway Foundation at the last meeting and I want to address that. Obviously Commander Cooney does not speak on behalf of all American Legions, because we have other American Legion members present here and we have gained support of several VFW's, American Legions, and other organizations who definitely support the Fairway Foundation as well as sponsors, and we are 100% made up of volunteers. So 100% of what we net is going to go to our project. A project that we announced in July of 2014, where it was the County that offered us two properties that we could rehab to award to Purple Heart recipients returning from Iraq, Afghanistan, Operation Freedom. And we will continue to do that despite the delays and again, the cease and desist letters and the delay in issuing our permit even though we were only the second application to actually submit our application, in accordance to the law, to the County Comptroller's Office.

So we will -- the money that is listed on the registry, the \$20,000 plus, will go to finish that project. Unfortunately, the two properties allocated to us were sold at the last auction, so we're hoping that the County Executive and the powers that be and the Legislators join back and help us complete our endeavor, but if we have to raise the money to buy a foreclosure ourselves, we will do that. And if -- that's exactly what we're doing. We're out there letting schools and organizations -- and 7-Eleven has just become one of our corporate sponsors who will be selling purple hearts, a means to raise money throughout Long Island, Nassau and Suffolk, to help our local veterans.

Mr. Cooney obviously is out of the loop because he had a question about we did want safeguards for the veterans. Remember, this is going to the neediest veterans, Purple Heart recipients wounded in battle, and we wanted to make sure that they were able to handle the responsibility of having a home. Legislator Stern, this panel is heavily trying to make sure that our veterans are not homeless. Well, we don't want to give them a home and they're not prepared to take on that

responsibility, so we did put safeguards in place, and we mirrored it under an organization nationally that has given away 650 homes. And it is a path to home ownership.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I need you to wrap up.

MS. KLUEPFEL:

So I would love to speak to Mr. Cooney privately because we are set for the same goal, and that is to help our local veterans. And thank you for your time.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you.

MR. COONEY:

Mr. Stern, since I was called out publicly --

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Not at this point because we have Holly coming up next.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

I feel like I was just here, which we were just two weeks ago. I don't have a lot to say today. I just wanted to remind everyone again December 7th is here in another week and a half. People need to do their open enrollments for the Part D. Newsday has a pretty extensive article today in the paper about the fact that the premiums have gone up, deductibles have gone up, and people need to look at their Prescription Part D plans and make a change if they need to. But it's very important to look at and, you know, send people our way if they need to have questions answered. We'd be happy to answer them for them.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Are you getting those calls now?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

We've been pretty busy. I know the HIICAP, you know, the RSPV HIICAP Program has been very, very busy. They had to add more people on to their call numbers and things like that because it's been very hectic. The numbers are there. People are calling. They need to look at the plans at least. Even if they don't make any changes, they need to at least look at them. That's the message we're trying to get out there.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And you have your people out there in the community holding those programs?

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

The advocates are out at the libraries and senior centers like they always are, and we have our phones, you know, they're manned by four people a day so we are getting calls in the office as well.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Anybody for Holly? Okay. Holly, thank you.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Happy Thanksgiving.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you. You too, to you and your family.

MS. RHODES-TEAGUE:

Thanks.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Director Ronayne. While the Director is making his way up, one of the items that we'll be discussing today will be the report that this committee received formally at our last session. The Director is here with us today to have that conversation but, again, I just would like to put on the record that we did receive the Director's report formally as a committee as of last committee meeting in the last cycle. Director, welcome.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Good afternoon. Chairman, members, as always, thank you for the opportunity to appear. As was stated, I would like to begin my remarks this afternoon with a reading of a brief report that I have submitted. It is being distributed now. It's really a copy of what has already been provided to the committee, but for the record I would like to read my report if I may.

"Mr. Chairman, members of the committee, on behalf of myself, the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency and the veterans of Suffolk County, I thank you for the opportunity to present to you on the status of the above referenced program. Prior to the enactment of this legislation, there were essentially no safeguards providing for the protection of consumers, both veteran and non-veteran alike, who chose to generously support entities in the community alleging to be providing support to those veterans through the use of solicited donations. While there seem to be relatively few bad actors operating within the County in this context, there were unfortunately at least a few complaints of solicitation by unknown or seemingly unscrupulous groups that had been fielded not only through my agency, but through the offices of several members of the Legislature as well.

In response to these concerns -- in response to the concerns raised by these reports it seemed prudent to explore options that would protect the consumer, ensure that veterans and/or the organizations alleged to be recipient of such donations were, in fact, receiving them. As this concern and the legislation have evolved over the years, it has become clear that the value of this law has indeed yielded positive results. While the large majority of entities who become known to us and comply with the requirements of this local law are, upon review, credible and legitimately providing a benefit to the veterans communities, there have been instances where concerns or irregularities have been discovered.

While very few actual denials have occurred, there have been several cases where changes or adaptation of procedures within applying entities have been necessary. This clearly has served the interest of the community. Were it not for the local law and the process it requires, it is reasonable to believe that consumers dollars may not have been applied in the manner it was suggested or believed that they would be. There continued to be areas of concern within the local law that have revealed themselves through practice. I look forward to working with the Chairman and our County Executive to effect appropriate changes assuring that these concerns are addressed in the future."

You have before you a copy of the program outline as it applies to permit applications and their status.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you, Director.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Mr. Chairman, as was stated earlier by you, a spreadsheet has also been distributed for your review. This largely summarizes the status of applicants and recipients to the program at this time. I think that the Charter's largely self-explanatory, but I'm happy to respond to any questions that you or

members of the committee may have. I have also included for your review a copy of the local law as it applies to this provision.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Great. Everybody has a copy? Everybody has a copy of the most recent, the updated numbers? That should be before all of the members of the committee at this time.

Director Ronayne, I agree with you, it is largely self-explanatory, but I'm hoping that because this is the first time we're going through the report if you'd be able to maybe take us through each of the items and what each of the categories are intended to show.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Certainly. Block one; name, address, telephone number of a not-for-profit organization is simply the applying entity or the entity that is in -- that we have made contact with to elicit compliance on this requirement. The certificate request or new submission or renewal is simply the status of the certificate, whether it is a new submission or a renewal submission, because they do vary from entity to entity. Documents Received is an outline of when documents had been received by our agency in response to requests for this information by that submitting not-for-profit organization. Amount Raised in 2014 is based on the County Comptroller's review of submitted financial documents and indicates amounts raised per those submitted documents, simply.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Do you know whether the amount reflected in the amount raised, is that due to local efforts exclusively or might those be regional or even national numbers on the part of the organization?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

In some cases these organizations, these entities, exist only on a local level. Other organizations do exist on a regional or national level. These numbers are not necessarily specific to Suffolk County, but relate to the financial submissions that are made to us and then forwarded to the Office of the County Comptroller for review. So they may in some cases reflect numbers that are not limited to Suffolk County.

Relative to the number in the Amount Raised in 2014, the next box is Amount Expended to Assist Veterans and Their Families in 2014. That number, again, reflects the amount of funds based on the submitted documents and upon review of the County Comptroller's Office that is agreed to have been provided in terms of support for those that the funds are being raised.

LEG. KRUPSKI:

Mr. Chairman.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Yes, Legislator Krupski.

LEG. KRUPSKI:

Thank you. So is there a breakdown of how that money has been spent? I mean, it's kind of a general category, Amount Expended to Assist Veterans and Their Families. It's -- is there -- is that funds that they, you know, they expend themselves or is this through County programs?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

No, this would be funds that are specifically allocated to assist veterans in the County or veterans organizations in the County. And again, the spreadsheet is a summary of a larger amount of information that is submitted to us. Included in the information that is submitted to us and, again, we do not directly vet the financials through my agency. The Office of the County Comptroller is

now charged with that task and they perform that function in the Comptroller's Office. The monies that are spent locally by these organizations are requested. In some cases it's not entirely -- it's not always an easy number to arrive at, and I've had this discussion with the Comptroller's Office because there are, and there have been raised, questions of privacy by disclosing the identity of individuals or recipients, that there would be a potential --

LEG. KRUPSKI:

I didn't mean specifically five dollars goes to a family to buy a turkey. I mean like is the money -- does it go through a program that's County run. Like the money flows through somewhere and they're buying 50 turkeys and they're being distributed a certain way, or is this money that's being spent to assist veterans without the County's oversight.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

We do not have a hand in the distribution or the allocation of the funds. That would be run directly by the entities.

LEG. KRUPSKI:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Tom, I see here the couple categories that you just went through, there's a dollar amount that was raised in 2014 and then there's an amount that is expended to assist veterans and their families in 2014. In a moment we're going to be getting to programs where money was expended specifically in Suffolk County. My question is, is there a category, has it been determined or has it been discussed that the Comptroller would also or is also doing an analysis on how much -- what kind of a dollar amount is actually raised exclusively pursuant to efforts made in Suffolk County.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

No, there is not.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The next box is Percentage of Donations Paid to Professional Fundraisers in 2014. We see zeroes and I'm actually quite happy that we see zeros reflected in that column. One of our concerns was that there are known to be organizations who engage or work with professional fundraisers to solicit donations on their behalf, and typically it has been our experience that those professional fundraising entities retain a very significant portion of the monies raised. So we're very happy to see that these organizations appear to not be engaging those services, which quite simply allows more of their monies to be directed to the cause under which they've been solicited.

Amount Expended to Support Veterans Programs in Suffolk County Specifically, and I think that goes to an earlier question of how much of the money is allocated locally as opposed to a potentially regional or national program. To the extent that we are able to establish, this number would reflect the amount of monies that are spent locally.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Just one second. Tom?

LEG. MURATORE:

I can wait.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Okay. I'm sorry. Please.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Percentage of Funds Used for Veterans and Donations to other Charitable Organizations in 2014. And this is a number, again, that a great deal of discussion had taken place on. We feel that it is an important metric to understand what proportion of the funds raised by any organization is, in fact, being used for the purpose under which it was solicited, how much of the funds are going directly to the expected recipients. So that would be the explanation of that number.

And then the remaining two numbers are simply the certificate number, which is assigned to each applicant upon issue of a registration certificate or a permit, and the expiration date of that document.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And so given this most recent analysis, how many organizations are operating in Suffolk County with a valid, up-to-date certificate?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

At this time, nine.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And as to those organizations that are on this list but do not have an up-to-date certificate number, what, if anything, do we know about these organizations? Why they are no longer certified and to what extent do we know if they continue to operate in Suffolk County although they do not have an up-to-date certificate.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Well, if I may, I'll give you a two part response to that question. The first is that the individual organizations who are represented on this spreadsheet represent organizations who are known to us and who we have either successfully engaged or who we have attempted to engage in the submission of documents under this requirement. We like to believe that we have a high level of compliance. In fact, there are organizations who have either not replied to us or have not replied in full to us, and they remain works in progress.

I'd like to use this opportunity to make clear that I think that this is a very important program, and as I read in my opening statement, in an effort to protect the intent or the will of the consumer when monies are donated, we have a finite amount of ability here. My agency is not an enforcement agency. We are not an enforcement entity, and when we initiate contact we continue to make contact through certified mail, return receipt requested and other means through our office and through the Office of the County Comptroller. We do not always receive compliance. That is an ongoing issue. It's an ongoing effort. It's a work in progress, if you will. So there are some entities here, there is at least one who is still reflected on here who is no longer, to our knowledge, conducting or engaging in any activity in Suffolk County, so they would no longer fall under the requirement.

I think this would also be a good opportunity to interject that there are entities in the community who we are aware of who operate, and there are a couple of different levels. The first, as you, I think, are all aware, are our Congressionally Chartered veterans support or veterans service organizations; our American Legions, Veterans of Foreign Wars, Marine Corp League, Masonic War Veterans, etcetera, all of the Congressionally Chartered affiliated organizations. Those organizations are by statute exempted from this requirement and are not, therefore, required to submit to us. That would be why they are not reflected.

There are other entities in the County who we are aware of, who for largely one or two reasons have been determined to fall outside of the requirement of this regulation and therefore are not required to comply or to register. And largely those organizations, that would be because they are not primarily engaged in fundraising or soliciting but, in fact, while they operate in the community, operate under County contract or they are grant funded through governmental agencies or through other providers or foundations and so forth. They also do not fall under this regulation. So I think that that would be largely an explanation as to why there are some entities performing in the community who are not included in this document, but that would be the explanation as to that. And if you have specific questions related to those I would be happy to address those with you at a later date because I would have to do research on each specific entity that you were requesting.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

And just because the underlying philosophy would be that those are organizations that are known to other levels of government and that there are other levels of audit and control that go along with receiving grants and operating as a contract agency.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Correct. And any agency that would be receiving grant funding, governmental grant funding, is subject to audit. They are known to other levels of governments and, again, are active in the community but they fall outside of our jurisdiction and -- for those reasons.

LEG. KRUPSKI:

Thank you. So, Director, if there are organizations -- so how do you make contact with these organizations? You have nine registered currently. Do you know of any others -- and how would you find other organizations? Do people come to you and say, *Look, this group is collecting money for the benefit of the veterans?* What steps would you take then to bring them into compliance with this law, or would you? Is that your responsibility?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

It is not at all uncommon for us to be informed of an organization or an entity in the community raising money that we are not, up until that moment of notification, aware of. When we are made aware of an organization we make an effort to perform a due diligence and investigate them to the extent able. We do make contact with these organizations and request that they come into compliance. We request that they submit either the documentation under the application, the standardized application that exists in this program, or an explanation as to why they believe that they would be exempted.

We typically in that scenario would request that they submit their documents irregardless of their belief and that an assessment would be made at that time as to whether or they fall within the regulation or not. But it is not at all uncommon for us to be contacted by a member of the community or one of our other organizations informing us of an organization that we're not, up until that time, aware of.

LEG. MURATORE:

Thank you. A couple of questions. You said you don't enforce the rules and regulations on this resolution. So who does enforce it then?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

My agency is not an enforcement entity. We're not an enforcement arm. We don't have that jurisdiction.

LEG. MURATORE:

So who does? Who enforces it?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That would fall to the County Attorney on civil and to the District Attorney's Office on criminal matters.

LEG. MURATORE:

Okay. Do we know if any of these organizations have salaried positions in them?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Say that again?

LEG. MURATORE:

Salaried positions. Any of these organizations have salaried positions, people that, you know, raise the money but collect a salary?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

That would be included in the submission of documents.

LEG. MURATORE:

Oh, you do know, in fact, that people are salaried.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

We know which organizations, again, to the extent that we are receiving compliance. When an organization submits to us, that is one of the things that we assess and that would be reflected in the percentage of monies returned to veterans or veterans organizations. That number would not be included in monies returned. That would be considered overhead or administrative and would be subtracted from the percentage number.

LEG. MURATORE:

To me the people that suffer this, that go through everything, are the good guys. People that are out there raising money legitimately and, you know, the County puts them through all the hoops, cross the T's, dot the I's, but my concern is do you have sufficient staff that can move complaints to the District Attorney, to the County Attorney's Office? I mean, how many people you got working on this program?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Right now we have one person working on this program.

LEG. MURATORE:

One person working on this. Okay. And how current is this report that you gave us?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

This report is current as of Friday.

LEG. MURATORE:

As of Friday. So people are still pending?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Yes.

LEG. MURATORE:

By the rules of the regulation they cannot start fundraising until their paperwork is complete?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The letter of the law would have them in violation. If they have been notified by us that they are required to be in compliance and they continue to engage in fundraising, they would be afoul of the law.

LEG. MURATORE:

Okay. Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Let me ask you this. Are there, and if so how many, applications for a permit pending with the agency right now?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I believe that number is seven pending or being reviewed for renewal. Again, the number does change. As of Friday that number was seven. We invite the participation of the public. We invite the participation of the veterans organizations in the community to help us be aware of who is in the community engaging in these activities. As much as I would like to think that we have an omnipotent presence, we clearly do not. When we are made aware, we make every effort to identify and to effectively assess what we're made aware of, and if compliance seems to be indicated, then we pursue that and we go to the efforts of making contact. When those organizations do not respond, then we get into the follow-up notification, the e-mails, the telephone calls.

I think it's important to note that while some organizations are more robust and some organizations are larger and more established, many of the folks in the community, as elementary as this application process is in my view, it still poses a challenge for some of the smaller, more grassroots, more mom and pop type organizations who have a willingness to comply, but sometimes may lack the sophistication or the resources to expediently submit what we are requesting. We do encounter that. We try to be reasonable. We try not to be unreasonable or overly burdensome, but there is a letter of the law that must be adhered to.

And as I said, again, in my opening remarks, I believe that despite some growing pains in the program and this legislation, Chairman, as you know, has been amended twice over the past several years, these are amendments that would reflect lessons learned as we have progressed. And I think that the small price to pay is the inconvenience on the part of the organizations being asked to comply in the interest of protecting the interests of our veterans. Ultimately my responsibility is to ensure that the interests of the veterans of Suffolk County are represented and protected, and while imperfect, I believe that we are making every effort to do so.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I presume that one of the reasons why, the most important reasons why the process is a much lengthier process, is because it now has the additional layer of review that is performed by the County Comptroller's Office.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And the addition of the County Comptroller's Office to this legislation is relatively new. It was enacted in April of this year. I welcomed that addition because previously it was far more challenging for my office to effectively and I think, well, effectively vet these organizations. To have the Comptroller assign an auditor to this program has allowed us to increase the degree of certainty that we are able to have in knowing that they are being properly assessed and that their financials are being correctly evaluated.

Upon review, and just as a point of clarification. I think there may have been a comment made earlier to the effect of that the Comptroller approves. The Comptroller does not approve these permits. That is done by my office. The Comptroller performs a review that is initiated and requested by my office. Upon completion of that review the Comptroller submits a response with a recommendation or a finding to my office. And one of the things that has on occasion occurred that has resulted in some delay is the bypassing of my office and entities engaging directly with the Office of the Comptroller, bypassing us, and to some extent us not knowing at all times what was in the pipeline, what paperwork was in the process of being handled or reviewed.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

In terms of efficiency, just efficiency of the process, responding to a request for additional information and documentation, is that best done directly with the Comptroller's Office or do you think that should be going through your office? Procedurally how has that been working?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Procedurally everything should come through our office and all responses should occur through our office. If nothing else, it allows for continuity and it allows for an ability to, again, understand where everything is in the pipeline at any given time.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Legislator Anker.

LEG. ANKER:

As always, I want to thank you for the work that you do, you know, with our veterans. So the question I have is as far as the procedure, what is done to the organization that has been deemed suspicious? Does a County Attorney write them or does the DA investigate them? What happens when there's -- and this is why we created this law, so we could address those that are doing the wrong thing, especially towards our veterans.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

The nature of a follow-up inquiry would be determined based on what we believe the area of concern would be, whether it would be a potentiality civil matter, whether it would be, you know, simply a matter of requiring more information or for purposes of clarification additional submissions. If there were activity that we believe rose to the level of requiring either civil action or criminal action, then we would at that time make the referral to the appropriate office, whether it be the County Attorney or the DA.

LEG. ANKER:

Have we had that?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

We have.

LEG. ANKER:

How many of those organizations?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Three. And I can tell you that while we have made relatively few, and over the course of the past several years we've had organizations who have come and gone. I think that, you know, without getting into specific applicants, I can tell you that there had been in the past one organization who we had several concerns with. We had several of what I consider to be very valid areas of concern. As a part of this process we were able to identify those concerns, and through a series of subsequent meetings and additional documentation being gathered, I'm very happy to say that we were able to

find common ground, if you will. And that one entity, and this goes back over a year now, that that one entity is now a strong performer in the community who is doing, in our view, very strong work on behalf of the veterans community. But earlier on while we, and I'm not suggesting that they were not doing fine work previously, but we did have concerns. And I think as a part of this process we were able to identify those concerns, we were able to sit down and determine what action may or may not have been appropriate to be taken on either side, whether it would be the County side or on the part of the not-for-profit, and with some changes in procedures we have now seen at least one of those organizations grow into a very strong community supporter who has achieved a very high level of respect in the community since those steps were taken. So I think that the process does work.

LEG. ANKER:

And I understand. I started a non-for-profit, a 501(c)(3) and, you know, you have to do that through the State for taxes and, you know, to be a legit not-for-profit organization. And I think what this legislation, again, like you've just said, it not only weeds out the bad actors, but also it supports those that are doing good and it makes them stronger. And, you know, being involved in civics and just being a Legislator and working with some of the historical societies and some of the fairly small not-for-profits, and even the newer ones, they need help. They need to understand how to navigate documentation and requirements, and I think this legislation is good legislation. It's good to hear that it's doing its job, so thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I thank you for that. And again, maybe just to state a personal view. This community, the veterans community in Suffolk County, is robust. It is a very, very large community. I doubt that there are very few households in Suffolk County who are not in some way touched either directly or indirectly by a family member who has worn our uniform. I believe that the ability for us as a government, as Suffolk County government, to work as partners, not in any adversarial way, but as partners with organizations who profess to be serving or working in pursuit of serving and supporting our veterans in the community, I think that by working as partners we have a unique ability to ensure that our larger community is well served and well protected, while at the same time potentially, as you stated, Legislator Anker, providing a degree of support and sometimes clarity.

We are able to provide an ability of these organizations to access resources that they might not otherwise have had the ability to access, largely through their lack of knowledge of the existence of certain support resources that we can make available to them. And I just think that at the end of the day this is a complimentary effort upon the part of the County to ensure that the interests of our veterans are being well served. I think at the end of the day that is certainly my responsibility as the County's advocate serving our veterans.

LEG. ANKER:

Do you have deadlines to, you know, require the documentation needed to submit to analyze they're, you know, a viable not-for-profit versus someone that may not meet the requirements?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

We do. Some of the deadlines, and this is something that we are looking at. We are revisiting this piece now because the applications, the permit issue date and the expiration dates are driven largely by when the process has run its course, and the permit is either granted or denied. That would be effectively when the clock begins on the date of renewal for the following, and not that that is in any way arbitrary, it's a factor of when these submissions are made, but what we're looking at now is perhaps, and again, in part because this report is due in June that we would like to standardize the permit expiration dates so that we would have a more refined response to this committee in June. That would probably mean establishing a calendar year for these permits, whether they would be January one to December 31, or whether they would be some other effective date for these permits

so that we could, again, tighten up the ability to submit a comprehensive report to this committee. And I think it would simplify when members of the general public refer to our website or when questions are raised, that it would not be as challenging to review a document and understand where everybody is because the timeline would be the same for all parties.

LEG. ANKER:

And I think that's what we also -- we want to make sure there's a fair analysis of all not-for-profits and that they have the same requirements and same deadlines, you know, just as you analyze all the different organizations.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And again, and I think maybe to go back to the beginning of your statement. One of the things that I'd like to make clear also is that the nature of the application, the package of the application is a standardized document. It does not vary from organization to organization or from entity to entity. Every applicant receives an identical package, so there should be no confusion on that part. All of the information requested -- in some cases there may be an item that is not relevant. An example would be that we have a current applicant, the not-for-profit 501 is less than one year old, so they do not have the ability to submit three years of past financials; they don't exist. So obviously there would be an exception made to that requirement. But I wanted to be clear that the application document is a standardized form. It's a uniform document.

LEG. ANKER:

One more thing. You mentioned Wounded Warriors. They haven't submitted their information? Because that is a very large organization.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

They are, they are. And my understanding, and I'm going to look at this as soon as I get back to the office. I should have caught that. My understanding is that they had submitted all of their newly requested documentation for renewal, but I can respond to the committee by e-mail today on that. I should have caught that one note.

LEG. ANKER:

Thank you.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

When a request for additional information goes out, typically how long, how many days is an organization allotted to respond to that request before some determination is made?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

On a renewal we typically like to allow them 30 days to respond. On a new application we initially will wait 30 days from the time that the application package is forwarded until the anticipated date of submission. There are instances where that 30 days is not adequate and extensions are requested, and absent some unknown reason at this time, those extensions are typically granted to allow the organizations. But again, while the application process is occurring, the expectation is that these organizations not be engaging in these activities. So it benefits both the parties and the County for this process to be expeditious.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

This process and this requirement is as much about providing a level of comfort to our consumers as well as drawing attention to those organizations that perhaps are not performing to the standard that we would hope for here in Suffolk County. And so we want to make sure that those organizations that do a good job are afforded every opportunity to do the good work that we hope they are doing. So there -- my question is what do we do to advise or to raise awareness for those

organizations that are doing business in Suffolk County, or that hope to do business in Suffolk County, whether they are local or national, that there is this requirement here in Suffolk County so that we don't cause unnecessary delay to those organizations that are seeking to do good things here locally.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

Again, there are organizations who we are aware of. When we are aware of somebody we make contact. If we become aware of an organization we make contact with them. We do not have a master list. I don't have a book that I can go to that tells me each organization who's actively engaged in these activities in Suffolk County unfortunately. We in large part do rely on the support and the assistance of the public and the veterans organizations.

We do visit -- myself and all of my staff are all members of various veterans organizations. When we attend meetings, when we attend functions we do, you know, in the community attempt to maintain an awareness of this requirement, and in part we rely on the support of that community to assist us in spreading that awareness.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

It's good to see many of our veterans are here with us today. At this point, do you believe, is it your feeling that all of the veterans organizations throughout Suffolk County are aware of this law and this requirement?

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I would like to say that all of the veterans organizations -- would you clarify by veterans organizations are we talking about our Congressionally Chartered larger VFW/American Legion type organizations?

CHAIRMAN STERN:

I would say mostly, but not limited to them.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

One of the things that we have the ability to do is through the County Executive's Veterans Advisory Board, each of the members of the Veterans Advisory Board, and these organizations are all represented at that body, each of these organizations are well aware of this legislation. And they are expected to take this information back to their respective county councils, districts and posts and disseminate the information on not only this, but any information provided at our Veterans Advisory Board meetings, to be distributed and disseminated back into their organizations. We're hopeful, our belief is that the larger organizations are all well aware of this. It is more, again, the community based smaller organizations who we may not have an awareness of.

LEG. ANKER:

Just a suggestion. You know, again, when I applied as a non-for-profit, you have to go through the New York State Attorney General, so maybe perhaps you can check the list, see what organizations are located in Suffolk County and then find out if they're veterans organizations. So perhaps that's just a way of identifying those local organizations.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

We have done that in the past and, honestly, it becomes labor intensive. There are also organizations who are incorporated under a name but conduct business as a DBA. That isn't always easily discernible through those filings. There are organizations that use the word veteran in their name that in truth have very little or nothing to do with actual veterans services or veterans support. There are organizations who do not include the word veteran in their name who do. It's a little bit of an undertaking to cull through those lists. We do but, again, that's more of a time

permitting type activity.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Director, anything else? Good? Okay. Well, first of all, thank you for the report. And, I mean, many questions here today, I'm sure there will be additional questions going forward. And as you pointed out, Director, changes to the legislation along the way have been a result of experience. And so as Legislator Anker points out, this is an important and a very meaningful procedure that we have implemented but will also continue to work with going forward as we continue to work with you and your staff, the Comptroller's Office as well as representatives of our many outstanding veterans organizations in the community to help ensure that this is a process that works and works for everyone.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

I appreciate that.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Thank you.

DIRECTOR RONAYNE:

And again, just to be clear. This is something, this is one of the things that we do through our agency. Again, it is one of. We do a great many things. This is not an inclusive effort by any means. We have a great deal more that we do through the Veterans Service Agency, and I just want to be clear that this is -- given the scale of this, as important as it is, it is one of many things that we do to serve the interests of our veterans.

CHAIRMAN STERN:

Very good. All right. Director, thank you. Okay. We do not have pending legislation before us today, so there being no other business before the committee, we are adjourned.

(*The meeting was adjourned at 1:28 p.m. *)