

Taskforce to Assist Retired (and Retiring) Veterans - TARV

Via Zoom, Wednesday, October 6, 2021

Meeting Minutes, 4 PM – 6 PM

Attendees:

Legislator Bridget Fleming
Legislator Susan Berland
Irene Donohue, Chief of Staff to Leg. Fleming
Michael Iasilli, Legislative Aide to Leg. Fleming
Holly Rhodes-Teague, Director of Suffolk County Office of the Aging
Melanie Sinesi, Director of Community Affairs – County Executive Bellone
Tom Ronayne, Director of Suffolk County Veterans Agency
David Rogers, All American Commander VFW Post 2913
Janet Santeramo, USMC, Attorney
Christine Glynn, Chair of Women Veteran Advisory Board
CPT Robert Cornicelli, Founder of Veteran Recovery Coalition

Members of the public:

- *Richard Valentine, Turning Point Academy*
- *Jillian Lewis, Student*

Appointments

Ronayne opened meeting and led with Pledge of Allegiance

Ronayne then went ahead to nominate Leg. Bridget Fleming as Chairperson of TARV, Holly Rhodes-Teague seconded the motion.

Leg. Fleming then nominated Christine Glynn as Vice Chairperson of TARV, Leg. Berland seconded the motion.

Leg. Fleming then nominated Robert Cornicelli as Secretary, Holly Rhodes-Teague seconded the motion.

Introduction of Board Members

Board members went around the Zoom room and introduced themselves and explained why they are part of the Taskforce and what they hoped to get out of it.

Robert Cornicelli discussed the need to improve conditions for veterans in Suffolk County, and consider ways to improve employment programs/incentives for veterans who are county employees.

Tom Ronayne discussed past efforts of “resource guides” and the need to individualize and better research organizations before providing them in guides.

Christine Glynn discussed how it was an honor to be on the taskforce and serve to help veterans.

Janet Santeramo discussed the need to address veterans with disabilities.

Menanie Sinesi discussed that she is looking forward to coordinating with the taskforce and assisting in any way possible.

Holly Rhodes-Teague mentioned the importance of helping veterans in the county and is looking forward to serving.

Public Attendees also spoke and mentioned the following:

- Richard Valentine – “The work that is to be done should be completed in house... And the information is out there. People in need just have to look for it.”
- Jillian Lewis – “It’s important to make resources available to veterans on the island. “

Dave Rogers chimed in to address Richard’s comment stating it is important to provide resources and help direct veterans to sources, especially as it corresponds to the VA, it can be difficult. [He then lost service on Zoom]

Taskforce Discussion

Leg. Fleming led the Discussion section stating the need to discuss priorities of the taskforce and ways to move forward on an actionable agenda. Asked if Robert wanted to begin sharing his thoughts.

Robert Cornicelli mentioned Long Island is one of the most unattractive places for Veterans due to high housing and living costs. He discussed experience working with General Flynn. And then moved to speaking on BAH, Basic Allowance for Housing. This is supposed to provide a Base Pay comparable to housing costs via zip code. Base pay for retirees, however, does not cover everything, even with Social Security.

He went on to discuss the plight of veterans with disabilities. If they are injured or have PTSD, what is provided to veterans doesn't sufficiently cover the cost and affects vets who are municipal workers specifically. These workers are forced to use personal time or sick time. Any service-related injuries during military service is covered for 20-30 days, but anything after related to the injuries that go unreported would not be granted accommodation.

He discussed how most veterans end up using their personal or sick time for injuries related to previous service-related injuries or mental health issues, such as PTSD. He insisted that the County work on solutions to give those with service-related injuries or disabilities added accommodations that provide them with paid leave.

Leg. Berland mentioned that the Town of Huntington after 9/11 passed a resolution where the municipality would pay the differential. Leg. Spencer (Doc) also passed a similar bill on the County level.

Robert Cornicelli interjected and said it is still coded in HR. It still needs to address the days needed.

Tom Ronayne mentioned the County address base pay and surplus allowances. BAH is not considered in the calculation for HR, so Cornicelli is right. But other things have been done and are being considered. Our position at the County is that there is a moral and ethical obligation to serving vets who work in the County. When it comes to vets in the private sector there are bigger gaps. If a veteran has a service connected condition, there are benefits through the VA that will compensate veterans for recovery at the rate of 100% the disability rate until the end of recovery time. That's approximately \$3,300 a month.

He added, guides are also important. Leg. Sarah Anker's office authored a very comprehensive program. They did tremendous work. But we have had challenges with all guides because they are too comprehensive, and the vetting has not been as thorough as they should be; some organizations may not be doing what they claim to be doing. And many of these organizations have been subject to constant change. Guides and information should be dealt out on an individual basis, they pose a logistical challenge.

Leg. Fleming noted Ronayne's perspective, asked Robert what his thoughts were on what he had to say about housing.

Robert stated that because of the high cost of housing, there needs to be economic incentives to keeping veterans on Long Island. He mentioned a Veterans Service Day in Nassau and Suffolk. He went back to speaking about time off for service related injuries. He said that no matter what service-related injury a veteran goes through, time off should not require coding by HR, or take away personal time, it should be provided.

Bridget asked how does this get implemented? What offices of county government does this?

Robert answered it would most likely have to be negotiated between the unions and the municipality. I spoke to John Durso who said that's how it can get done.

Leg. Berland interjected and stated we can legislate this for County Employees.

Leg. Fleming stated in order to legislate, we would have to work with the unions.

Leg. Berland mentioned she would share Leg. Spencer's legislation, something called ARM.

Leg. Fleming clarified, so Robert would like to see extending service-related recovery days.

Robert interjected and said that if it is done at the state level, there is no need for it on the County level. But added that certifications of 55 A, B, and C require the state to put full time jobs aside for certain veterans. Civil Service exams can be waived. He mentioned that 55 A, B, and C should be applied to town and county jobs. He added, the fact that retired vets have to come in at entry level is a deterrent.

Leg. Fleming mentioned we can speak with Tom Melito to see what steps can be taken at the county level to do that.

Robert responded, one thing we should consider is Veterans Boards. Every individual who undergoes trauma or PTSD needs additional time. We need to send vets with disabilities to Veteran Boards so they

can be connected with the right people who know what they're going through and can provide them with appropriate services.

Leg. Fleming asked whether this should be created by the County.

Robert stated it could be... We need something to buffer disciplinary hearings with managerial staff and veterans. Janet can speak to this.

Janet stated that most vets feel more comfortable discussing issues with other vets, instead of to their bosses. It is important to note that most vets are not complainers. In municipalities, there are a lot of vets – especially in Suffolk.

Leg. Fleming asked whether a Veterans Board is for municipal employees who are vets?

Holly asked are we just talking about Suffolk County government, specifically? What is the purpose of the legislation?

Leg. Fleming noted this is just one component of the broader agenda.

Ronayne mentioned this is an interesting idea. If we hear about a veteran who is an employee, one thing we do is advise that the veteran employee attend veteran peer appointment meetings. Veterans certainly have their own language. We've seen some promise with these peer groups. We need to also be mindful that some disabilities are not long term. Some of them are short term.

Leg. Fleming responded, yes but we need to be aware of the mental health challenges that exist.

Final Report Discussion:

Leg. Fleming mentioned that the legislation calls for a final report. And asked how we should proceed?

Janet said we should speak to vets directly in the community and ask them how we can help. Asking vets what would help vets stay here in Suffolk County is a good start.

Leg. Fleming agreed and asked, how should we garner feedback?

Janet mentioned that the VFW posts, the legions, and speak to vets about their struggles and issues. Vets like to congregate together, and would like input from government and have the opportunity to speak about their shared experience.

Melanie said that we have a list that has leaders and partners that can provide info on groups and funding distribution lists.

Leg. Fleming asked if Melanie can share this list with the group so we can put together a letter related to that list.

Leg. Berland mentioned that her office is doing a survey to go out to women vets. It may be good to collaborate. Putting through a survey digitally and through hard copy is what they plan to do.

Leg. Fleming asked what about a listening tour for members, to take part in?

Holly mentioned survey monkey is something that is useful.

Ronayne said that more than 80% of our initial contact with vets came from loved ones and families of vets. Setting up booths at community events is important and a way to also meet the families.

Holly said it has to be a combination in order to obtain comprehensive results.

Leg. Fleming suggested that we think about outreach and meeting frequency. How often should we meet?

Ronayne responded that once a month is probably good.

Leg Fleming ask if the group agreed, to which there was no objection.

She confirmed that once a month would be set. She asked Robert as secretary of the taskforce to obtain Minutes from our office and to send to member list.

She asked that Melanie send the list she spoke about and also asked if Leg. Berland could help out with providing resources for survey. She also suggested we set up an email chain to keep members engaged in the work.

She added that from now until the next meeting we should consider how to frame these two resources together and address retired vets and families.

Robert interjected and mentioned that we need to be careful not to overload ourselves. We should be clear in our mission statement. We already know comprehensive lists of resources need to be vetted. We should focus on keeping vets here and attracting vets to Suffolk County.

Melanie suggested it would be a good idea to attend Freedom Fest on October 24th, vets are able to table for free. It may be of interest for members and other to attend and speak with attendees.

Leg. Fleming stated that it may be too soon. But could be helpful for issue finding. She added, we could immediately distribute the resolution and read it, to offer thoughts on what would be valuable.

She asked if the group is in favor, to which she received agreement.

She added, we need to also make an amendment to extend the time to produce a report. Is it reasonable to conclude our taskforce in October of 2022?

Janet replied that one year is a good enough timeframe, to which Robert agreed.

Leg. Fleming stated that a draft amendment will extend the timeframe to produce a report in one year's time, making 10/22 the issuing month.

Next Meeting

Leg. Fleming asked if Nov 18th @ 4 via Zoom is good for the next TARV meeting.

Leg. Berland seconded the proposed date, to which all agreed.