

1 VETERANS & CONSUMER AFFAIRS COMMITTEE
2
3 OF THE
4
5 SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE
6
7 **MINUTES**
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10 A meeting of the Veterans & Consumer Affairs Committee of the
11 Suffolk County Legislature was held hybrid via Zoom
12 video-conferencing/in-person in the Rose Y. Caracappa Legislative
13 Auditorium of the William H. Rogers Legislature Building, 725
14 Veterans Memorial Highway, Smithtown, New York on February 28,
15 2022.

16
17 **Members Present:**

18 Legislator Nick Caracappa - Chairperson
19 Legislator Anthony Piccirillo - Vice Chair
20 Legislator Sarah Anker
21 Legislator Bridget Fleming
22 Legislator Leslie Kennedy
23 Legislator Al Krupski
24 Legislator Robert Trotta
25

26 **Also in Attendance:**

27 Kevin McCaffrey - Presiding Officer
28 Frank Tassone - Clerk/Suffolk County Legislature
29 Brett Robinson - Chief Deputy Clerk/Suffolk County Legislature
30 Bill Duffy - Counsel/Suffolk County Legislature
31 Bob Martinez - Aide to Legislator Caracappa
32 Ali Nazir - Aide to the Presiding Officer
33 All Other Interested Parties
34

35 **Minutes Taken By:**

36 Gabrielle Severs - Court Stenographer
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1 (The meeting was called to order at 1:03 p.m.)

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3 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

4 Good afternoon, everyone. I'm going to call to order our Veteran
5 and Consumer Affairs committee. Before I do anything else, can we
6 all please stand and rise for the Pledge of Allegiance. I'm going
7 to ask Legislator Piccirillo to lead us.

8
9 **LEG. PICCIRILLO:**

10 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

11
12 (Pledge of Allegiance)

13
14 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

15 Please remain standing for a moment to recognize not only what's
16 going on in this world right now but to all the troops and the
17 families and the citizens of the Ukraine, all our troops and those
18 troops going to their aid. May we all pray for their wellbeing and
19 health, and hopefully that peace will come out of all of this
20 sometime very soon.

21
22 (Moment of Silence Observed)

23
24 Thank you. Mr. Clerk, are there any correspondence?

25
26 **MR. ROBINSON:**

27 No, Mr. Chairman.

28
29 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

30 All right. At this point, I'm going to open up public portion of
31 the meeting. Right now, I have two speakers signed up. The first
32 being Ray Meyer from Paws of War. Before you speak, Ray, can I
33 just do quickly -- have a roll call of committee members,
34 Mr. Clerk.

35
36 (Mr. Robinson called the roll.)

37
38 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

39 Here.

40
41 **LEG. PICCIRILLO:**

42 Present.

43
44 **LEG. KRUPSKI:**

45 Here.

46
47 **LEG. FLEMING:**

48 Present.

49
50 **LEG. ANKER:**

51 Here.

52
53 **LEG. KENNEDY:**

54 Here.

55
56 **LEG. TROTTA:**

1 (No response.)

2

3 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

4 He'll be right on.

5

6 **MR. ROBINSON:**

7 Six.

8

9 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

01:04PM 10 Thank you.

11

12 Mr. Meyer, please.

13

14 **MR. MEYER:**

15 I'll keep it short. I started trying -- starting with fundraisers
16 trying to raise some money for the organization pre-Covid. That
17 all kind of changed, so I got in touch with the organization. Rob
18 and I have become pretty good friends and I can see all the good
19 that the organization Paws of War is doing for the families, for
01:05PM 20 the veterans, for the animals, for veterans overseas as well as
21 domestically so I just, on Rob's behalf, I'm very happy to have met
22 him and know him, and the program is really doing some really good
23 things. Thank you.

24

25 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

26 Thank you, Ray. It should be noted I know Ray for quite a few
27 years from my past life at the Suffolk County Water Authority.

28

29 And I did not mention it but there are presentations. We're going
01:05PM 30 to be hearing from, number one, Thomas Ronayne, director of the
31 Office of the County Executive's Veterans' Service Agency, and
32 we're also going to hear from Rob Misseri. He's president and
33 co-founder of Paws of War, so I thank them both for coming out, but
34 we have to get through the public portion first before listening to
35 those presentations.

36

37 So next up, we have -- I don't want to blow this. Ykaterina Henter
38 (ph). I think that's going to be -- I'm pretty sure that's for
39 Public Works. I'm pretty sure, Mr. Clerk, someone signed up here,
01:06PM 40 but they are from SILO, so I'm pretty sure that's going to be for
41 the next committee if I'm not mistaken. I don't want to be
42 presumptuous or assume anything, but I'm pretty sure.

43

44 **LEG. PICCIRILLO:**

45 I agree.

46

47 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

48 All right. So if there's no objections, is there anybody in the
49 audience that would like to speak? I have no other -- anyone
01:06PM 50 signed up to talk, and no one is responding, so we will move on.
51 We have no appointments and so we're going to move on to
52 presentations.

53

54 At this point, it is my pleasure to introduce Thomas Ronayne. He
55 is the Director of the Office of the County Executive's Veterans
56 Service Agency, and I'm hoping he's going to provide us with an

1 overview of the services provided by that agency as well as their
2 missions and operations that they've accomplished or hoped to
3 accomplish through this committee and beyond. It really is an
4 honor to have you here, and I appreciate it. Without further
5 adieu, please, the floor is yours.

6
7 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

8 Thank you, Mr. Chairman. As always, thank you to the members of
9 the committee. Some old friends, faces on the committee here today
01:07PM 10 and some new. But again, thank you for the opportunity for us to
11 be here and share with you our perspective, some insight as to just
12 who and what is the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency. I can
13 tell you, I'll preface my remarks by saying that Suffolk County is
14 a good place to live if you are a veteran. We actually are a
15 county that is known not only for having a comprehensive and
16 effective model for addressing and providing for the needs and the
17 wants of veterans, but there are a lot of reasons why that is so,
18 and again, as I said to you, Mr. Chairman, before the meeting, my
01:08PM 19 presentation this morning is a bit of a -- respectfully, history
20 lesson as to why we are in the place that we are in the place that
21 we are today. As the home to the single largest number of veterans
22 of any of New York State's 62 counties, there's got to be a reason
23 for that. We have wonderful beaches and the restaurants aren't
24 half bad, but there have got to be reasons why veterans gravitate
25 to and stay here on Long Island and specifically in Suffolk County.
26 And as luck would have it, I just broke the ear off of my
27 eyeglasses so if you see me holding my eyeglasses up, it's not for
28 any reason other than I'm hoping they don't fall during my
29 presentation.

01:09PM 30
31 So Suffolk County is probably home to the single largest veteran
32 population of any of New York State's 62 counties. The reasons for
33 this have their origins -- let's see. I wrote this; I should be
34 able to read it. The reasons for this have their origins in
35 pre-World War II through this very day, and as we sit here together
36 in this chamber, I'll try to explain why. Suffolk County serves.
37 We always have, and as a result our county residents return from
38 their service to their home county and go on with their own lives
39 often continuing their service in one form or another. Military
01:09PM 40 veterans, you may be interested to know that -- are statistically
41 more likely than the general population to serve their communities
42 in uniform after military service. Very often, we will come home
43 and we will serve -- continuing to serve as National Guard, as
44 reservists, in some form or another in military uniform but we also
45 are disproportionately represented in the ranks of police and fire
46 services, emergency medicine, and again, our national guard and
47 reserves. Our children are also more likely to serve in uniform
48 than the children of nonveterans.

01:10PM 49
50 Just a few short generations ago, Long Island was the hub of
51 military and defense contracting in America. Other areas where
52 veterans were drawn in large numbers, whether working at Grumman or
53 Republic or Fairchild or Wohral (ph) or countless others, these
54 veterans were at the forefront of engineering and designing the
55 equipment, systems platforms of tomorrow. Without Long Island and
56 Suffolk County, America would not have gotten to the moon. We

1 would not have fielded the F-111 or the F-105 ThunderChief or the
2 extraordinary -- and you can ask any soldier who's ever waited for
3 one to come in and give him a helping hand, the A-10 Warthog.
4 These are all born and built right here in Suffolk County.

5
6 When wars were being fought, it was our family members, our Rosie
7 the Riveters who were here at home hard at work in the same
8 factories and plants creating what was frequently considered
9 impossible or unsustainable but they did it. Today, while smaller
01:11PM 10 in number, there are still many defense and aerospace firms deeply
11 engaged in the 21 century versions of sending a man to the moon. I
12 could continue with this history lesson, but my point was, well, to
13 make a point, which I believe that I have. Services important to
14 those of us in Suffolk County. The Suffolk County Veterans Service
15 Agency endeavors to respect this history of service and the men and
16 woman who have and continue to wear the uniform of this great
17 nation. We do that be adhering to a strict policy and philosophy
18 that serving those who have served us is not only a great honor but
19 an absolute obligation. We provide professional services to active
01:12PM 20 duty reserves, National Guard, veterans, their dependants, and
21 their survivors. So while we are to call -- the name of the agency
22 is Veterans Service Agency, we actually cast quite a broad net.

23
24 In order to achieve the level of service appropriate, we maintain
25 high standards of training that exceed those required by the U.S.
26 federal law. While we are credentialed and accredited by the
27 Office of General Counsel of the United States Department of
28 Veterans Affairs, we also maintain strong professional alliances
29 with veteran service organizations such as the American Legion, the
01:12PM 30 VFW, and so on. New York State Division of Veterans Services is
31 another organization that we have an extraordinarily strong and
32 important relationship with. We regularly train with these
33 entities often serving as trainers to other veteran service
34 agencies, other governmental offices, NGOs and not-for-profits. A
35 brief summary of the services we provide would include but is not
36 limited to developing and processing claims for disability before
37 the Department of Veterans Affairs, conducting community outreach
38 to ensure that our agency and services are known to the community,
39 liaising with other government agencies to ensure continuity of
01:13PM 40 access for our clients, conducting programs in the community to
41 link veterans and our resources, conducting annual recognition,
42 remembrance, and memorial services to honor those who have served
43 and those who have fallen.

44
45 Suffolk County proudly co-administers the Joseph Dwyer Veterans
46 Peer Support program. That program, which is now -- the governor
47 has actually indicated in her 2022 budget that she intends to fund
48 the Joseph Dwyer program based on the Suffolk County model as a
49 full statewide program, so the program, which is now in 27 counties
01:14PM 50 across New York State, will be expanding to all 62. That is an
51 extraordinary thing. I can't overstate the significance of that.
52 The Dwyer program in the first three years that we had the Dwyer
53 program here in Suffolk County -- and some of this is anecdotal but
54 some of this has been born out in evidence-based reports. There
55 have been two published reports from SUNY Albany School of Social
56 Welfare on our Dwyer program. I will tell you that the rate of

1 completed suicide amongst veterans in Suffolk County in the three
2 years following the introduction of the Joseph Dwyer program
3 reduced by 50 percent. That in and of itself is such an
4 extraordinary achievement. If we all chose to put our coats on and
5 go home right now, we have done a good job. We have really done
6 something special. Clearly, we have a lot more to do.

7
8 Suffolk County was also the first New York State county to be
9 invited to become a part of what is known as the mayor's challenge
01:15PM 10 to end suicide amongst service members, veterans, and their
11 families. This is a joint effort between the Department of
12 Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and SAMHSA, which is
13 the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
14 within the federal government. This is not a program that you can
15 seek inclusion in. It is by invitation only. I will tell you that
16 four years ago -- five years ago, Suffolk County was the only New
17 York County invited to be a part of the mayor's challenge. Since
18 then, New York City has come on, and New York State as a whole has
19 now been brought into the program as a governor's challenge program
01:16PM 20 where I serve as a member and as a committee member.

21
22 So we are making our mark in very important ways here in Suffolk
23 County. The work that we are doing here is being felt well beyond
24 the borders of Suffolk County and, in fact, and throughout the
25 United States. There was a bill last year. I don't know if it will
26 be reintroduced this year, but there was a house bill introduced
27 using the Suffolk County, New York model to apply the Joseph Dwyer
28 program nationally, and initially it would've launched in the 50
29 cities or counties in the United States with the largest veteran
01:16PM 30 populations. So that is an ongoing discussion. We continue to
31 work with our federal partners to encourage co-sponsorship but
32 clearly the Dwyer program is significant. It was born here in
33 Suffolk County. It was born on the third floor of the Dennison
34 Building, in fact.

35
36 We maintain strong collaborative relationships with emergency and
37 transitional housing providers. This has resulted in Suffolk
38 County being recognized by HUD as having made significant progress
39 towards ending homelessness amongst veterans in our community. I
01:17PM 40 will say that in the words of the deputy HUD administrator who came
41 to Suffolk County to make this announcement, the words that HUD
42 used were that we had actually ended homelessness amongst veterans
43 in Suffolk County. I don't believe that that is an achievable
44 goal. It's a perpetually moving target, but to be recognized by
45 HUD as having accomplished that, I think says a great deal. I'd
46 like to say it was about us, but truthfully, that accomplishment
47 could only have been accomplished, as with so many of them, through
48 very strong partnerships, very effective partnerships with our
49 partners in the community. Places like Paws of War, some our
01:18PM 50 housing partners, some of our other providers who provide services
51 and programs that may not necessarily seem directly related to
52 housing or suicide prevention but have an incredibly effective
53 impact on those things.

54
55 We work closely with active duty, reserve, and national guard units
56 throughout the county. This includes pre-deployment,

1 post-deployment, and other programs to ensure transitioning service
2 members and their families understand how to access services and
3 benefits. We maintain shared service agreements with the Town of
4 Brookhaven to have a veterans services agency office within
5 Brookhaven Town Hall. This greatly eases the challenges some
6 veterans have in accessing our offices. There's no need to travel
7 to our Riverhead or Hauppauge offices, and they can attend to their
8 veterans' services needs while they are at town hall addressing
9 other needs, whether they are meeting with a council member or
01:19PM 10 paying a bill, veterans services is in the building.

11
12 We also maintain a shared services agreement with New York State
13 and have an office in the Long Island State Veterans Home on the
14 campus of Stony Brook University. That office, while we do operate
15 with a specialty or emphasis on serving the needs of our older
16 veterans and the veterans with relationships in the nursing home,
17 that office is a community office. It is open to the entire
18 community including the entire campus of Stony Brook University,
19 which again further extends our reach.

01:19PM 20
21 There are many facets to what veterans' services does and the
22 challenges of those of serving a population that often shuns
23 access and government services or just seeking services or supports
24 in general. As veterans, we are uniquely qualified for our shared
25 experiences and commonality of background in many cases to work
26 with and to serve our brothers and sisters in arms. As I stated in
27 my opening, Suffolk County owes a tremendous obligation to this
28 population, and with the unwavering support of our County
29 Executive, a supportive legislature, and a grateful community, we
01:20PM 30 are, I believe, accomplishing this goal. On the days where we may
31 fall short of achieving a desired outcome, we do apply our military
32 training and we use every resource at our disposal to adapt, to
33 improvise, and to overcome. Challenges and diversity in pursuit of
34 the men and women who have given so much so that we can live in a
35 free and proud country and our nation. I thank you.

36
37 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

38 I thank you and all those who have served this great country. Real
39 quick, I know you are also instrumental in the -- and we discussed
01:20PM 40 the Lieutenant Michael Murphy Navy Seal museum.

41
42 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

43 Yes, sir.

44
45 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

46 You want to talk anything about that just to surprise us.

47
48 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

49 Absolutely. Just to give us a very brief overview. The Lieutenant
01:21PM 50 Michael Murphy U.S. Navy Seal Museum and Sea Cadet Training Center
51 is currently completing construction in Sayville. This was a very
52 unique shared agreement that the County was able to reach with the
53 Lieutenant Michael Murphy Museum. There was actually a set aside
54 within the county park and the museum is being constructed. It is
55 near completion on that park. Upon obtaining the certificate of
56 occupancy, the county will assume ownership of the facility. It

1 will be operated and maintained by the museum at the cost to the
2 county, but the museum itself will be on county land, which has a
3 number of advantages that we're very excited about. I think
4 everybody in this room is probably aware of the story of Lieutenant
5 Michael Murphy. Lieutenant Murphy, a Pat-Med graduate, a young man
6 who went on to become a naval officer, was killed conducting
7 Operation Red Wings in Afghanistan along with most of the members
8 of his team. Mike was -- he was a neighborhood kid. In fact,
9 Mike's favorite job when he was -- prior to entering service was
10 serving as a lifeguard at Lake Ronkonkoma. The story goes that
11 when he decided to enter the Navy, he used to do his training swims
12 back and forth across the lake. I'm exhausted thinking about that,
13 but he would do that recreationally. Mike and his story were
14 inspirational. They continue to inspire us.

01:22PM

15
16 Mike, upon being returned home and buried amongst so many other
17 heroes at Calverton National Cemetary, was ultimately posthumously
18 awarded the medal of honor. In honoring Mike's service and Mike's
19 legacy, this museum is being constructed, but as a museum board
20 trustee, I would say to you that this is -- while his name is on
21 the building, this is not the Mike Murphy museum. This museum
22 encompasses the entire history of naval special warfare. We have a
23 number of exhibits, and I think probably at least as significant as
24 the museum itself is that a large portion of the museum's mission
25 is to educate our young people, and as such, the Lieutenant Michael
26 Murphy Sea Cadet Division was invited to essentially co-habitate
27 the museum. About 40 percent of the museum's square footage will
28 be occupied with classrooms and the training center for the navy
29 sea cadets. We have no greater obligation than to make sure that
30 our kids are properly and well-trained in a safe environment. This
31 will do that. The intended opening date, we lost some momentum
32 because of Covid, but the date of the museum opening will be June
33 28. That is the anniversary of Mike's death. That was the
34 anniversary of the day that Operation Red Wing took place, and we
35 will very certainly get VIP invitations to the members of the
36 committee to ensure that you are able to be there and to celebrate
37 this with us.

01:23PM

01:24PM

38
39 I will tell you that upon the opening of this museum, it will be
40 only the second U.S. Navy Seal Museum in the United States of
41 America. The existing navy seal museum right now is in Fort
42 Pierce, Florida. They've been tremendous partners to us. They've
43 assisted us in many ways in developing and designing our museum,
44 but Suffolk County will be home to only the second navy seal museum
45 in the United States. That's pretty significant.

01:24PM

46
47 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**
48 That's outstanding.

01:25PM

49
50 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**
51 That's really extraordinary. Selfishly, from a military and
52 veteran's perspective, I don't think we could have asked for a
53 better home. Bigger picture? I think that this is an economic
54 development opportunity for us. I think that this is an
55 opportunity for us to share with the world the diversity and the
56 focus that we have here in Suffolk County, and I thank you for

1 asking about the museum. If anybody would like to visit or tour
2 the museum prior to its June 28 opening, please contact me, and I
3 will arrange for a tour; in fact, I'll make it a point to invite
4 Mr. Murphy, Dan Murphy, Mike's father, to join us on that tour.

5
6 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

7 I had the privilege of meeting Dan plenty of times at some of the
8 baseball tournaments in Pat-Med, and, really, it's an honor, and to
9 see the tribute being paid, and it's important to note that
01:26PM 10 Lieutenant Michael Murphy wasn't the only one to lose his life,
11 make the ultimate sacrifice on that mission. I think we've all
12 seen and read about -- seen the movie, read about it, and the fact
13 that they all paid the ultimate sacrifice, I know Mike -- I know
14 what Mike Murphy did, Lieutenant Murphy did, to try his best to
15 protect his men, but ultimately, too many lives were lost on that
16 mission.

17
18 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

19 If I may, I'll share with you just a little tribute tidbit that a
01:26PM 20 lot of people, for some reason, haven't tracked on. There was a
21 ship, a guided missile destroyer named in honor of Mike, the U.S.S.
22 Michael Murphy, the U.S.S. Michael P. Murphy. DDG 112 and hull
23 numbers on navy ships -- every ship has got a number painted on the
24 side, the 112 painted on the side of DDG 112, the U.S.S. Michael P.
25 Murphy is actually a nod to Mike's childhood when he lived -- he
26 grew up just one block off of Route 112. He was a fixture along
27 112, so the hull number on that ship is actually a nod to our Route
28 112.

29
30 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

31 I did not know that.

32
33 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

34 Well, there you go.

35
36 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

37 There you go. You learn something new everyday, and that's
38 fascinating, really, to have that. I mean, it's unfortunate why it
39 came up or how it came up, but the fact that the recognition is
40 there, not only for Lieutenant Michael Murphy but to recognize his
41 hometown on the side of a ship, on a vessel like that, it's
42 amazing, it really is. Thank you for that. I appreciate that.
43 It's amazing.

44
45 All right. Well, with that, I have to say, Tom, Mr. Ronayne, I
46 want to also recognize some other people, other veterans who are in
47 the auditorium and that's Mr. Dennis Sullivan who I know very well
48 being in my district. Thank you, Dennis, for your service and what
49 you do. Board member of the New York State Veterans Home, former
01:28PM 50 New York State VFW commander, former commander post 4927, and a
51 Selden resident, Vietnam veteran. Dennis Sullivan, I appreciate
52 everything you do as well, so I don't mean to leave anybody out. I
53 only recognize Dennis. Everyone is equally important out there,
54 but I think he's -- I'm trying to say you did a great job for us,
55 and you're always there for our office, Dennis, so thank you for
56 everything you do as well and everybody else in the audience,

1 please, who is a veteran.

2

3 At this point -- thank you, Director Ronayne, for everything, all
4 your information, the history lesson, the update on the museum, and
5 that little tidbit about -- what did you say, DG 112 or?

6

7 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

8 DG 112.

9

01:29PM

10 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

11 DG 112. Let me write that down. Outstanding. At this point, we
12 are going to have our second speaker. Oh, I'm sorry. Any
13 questions? I'm so sorry, everybody. I'm jumping the gun. I'm
14 going to recognize Legislator Thorne.

15

16 **LEG. THORNE:**

17 Thank you so much. First, thank you to all the veterans in our
18 audience as well as countrywide. Michael Murphy was a member of my
19 district, number seven, proud resident along with so many other
20 folks out there. We also have Kathy Doherty (ph), female navy
21 veteran in the office, from my district, so we certainly welcome
22 them. I did have one question. We are dealing with a huge -- I
23 don't know if huge is the proper term, but we are large number of
24 homeless in district seven, especially on the 25 corridor. Many of
25 those are veterans. Is there an outreach from your office to the
26 veterans that are living in the woods? We had one behind Home
27 Depot. I'm very proud to announce that after 10 years, we have
28 found him -- he has accepted services. We've got him safe, and we
29 got him in a home, and we are going to collect his things with him;
30 but what outreach is being done from the veterans services to these
31 veterans that are currently living in our woods?

01:29PM

32

33 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

34 Well, most of the outreach that we can duct with regard to homeless
35 veterans is done in concert with either other agencies or
36 community-based partners, Paws of War being one of them. Paws of
37 War, on the surface, many people may not consider the significant
38 role that they play in addressing homelessness, but many times we
39 will encounter homeless individuals -- in this instance, veterans
40 -- who have pets. They have animals with them wherever they may be
41 living. They are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless.
42 Organizations like Paws of War have on countless occasions come out
43 and either helped us trap feral animals, spay and neuter, animals
44 so that the homeless veteran responsible for that animal would
45 accept services. Many times, they'll deny access to services until
46 their animals are -- until they know their animals are cared for,
47 so's that's one example of how the community-based partner
48 relationships are so important. We maintain very, very close
49 relationships with a number of our housing providers, the largest
50 of which being the United Veterans Beacon House. United Veterans
51 Beacon House has recently added several new houses, and I believe
52 they are in the process of acquiring an additional house now, which
53 puts them in about the 55 properties territory. They operate a
54 large facility at Northport V.A. I believe it's 30 beds at this
55 point. We call it "Building 11," the Beacon House facility.
56 They've got about 55 additional properties throughout the

01:30PM

01:31PM

1 communities where veterans are housed. I would say that the nature
2 of the housing that we try to achieve for veterans tends to be not
3 sheltering. We tend to have veterans in smaller congregate
4 settings with other veterans, and we find that there are many other
5 advantages to housing veterans with other veterans. There's a bond
6 or a camaraderie exists in almost all cases that is not only
7 comforting but therapeutic.

8
9 So, yes, we do have outreach; we do respond if we are contacted
01:32PM 10 about a veteran or a potential homeless veteran in the community.
11 Unfortunately, it's a widespread problem. The area that you're
12 referring to specifically, we have had chronic problems there for
13 many, many years, and whether they be veterans or otherwise, our
14 ability is limited by the ability that we have to encourage
15 veterans to accept services. Very often, we are dealing with
16 mental health issues, alcohol, substance abuse issues, so sometimes
17 it becomes more of a complex matter than simply responding,
18 identifying yourself, and providing access to a service. It can be
19 a lengthy effort for any individual case, but yes we do work with
01:33PM 20 that. It's an ongoing problem; but again, we've done some very
21 innovative things in Suffolk County. We have Liberty Village. You
22 may or may not be aware of Liberty Village. We have Liberty
23 Landing in Ronkonkoma, which is another largely veteran-centered
24 community. These are operated by our not-for-profit
25 community-based partners.

26
27 **LEG. THORNE:**

28 Thank you so much. I just know that it's been my experience
29 because I have been up on those woods and talked to some of those
01:34PM 30 folks myself, and it seems -- and no slam to anybody else -- unless
31 it's a veteran talking to a veteran, often they won't receive
32 services. So if there's any way my office can help, I'm all in
33 including going in the woods with you to help these veterans.
34 People that served our country should not be laying in backwoods
35 somewhere even though I know there is a -- and you're absolutely
36 right. Substance abuse, alcoholism is running wild, but we have to
37 do everything we can. I will do everything I can in my small
38 little task as the legislator in that area to help those veterans,
39 and feel free to reach out to my office to get those services to
01:34PM 40 them, and any way I can help, feel free to call on me, so thank you
41 so much for what you're doing.

42
43 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

44 I very much appreciate that. And as I've said to the chairman,
45 when you need us, use us and abuse us. That's why we're here.

46
47 **LEG. THORNE:**

48 You're going to be sorry you said that, sir.

49
01:35PM 50 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

51 We'll see.

52
53 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

54 No, he won't. You can plan on that. As I said earlier, this is a
55 partnership, and we need to let these veterans know that these
56 services are available to them. We are more than eager and willing

1 to help, so with your help and our help together, partnership, we
2 will hopefully convey that message to all those who need it and are
3 worthy of it as veterans.

4
5 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

6 If I could just very quickly, we did not acknowledge one proud
7 veteran in the room. We actually have a distinguished graduate of
8 the U.S. Naval Academy of Annapolis here, and that is Lieutenant
9 Nick Lalota.

01:35PM 10

11 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

12 Ah, here he is. I didn't know he was here.

13
14 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

15 Lieutenant.

16
17 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

18 Well, we thank -- we are very fortunate to have Lieutenant Lalota
19 with us, and thank you for your services, Nick.

20
21 **MR. LALOTA:**

22 Thanks, guys.

23
24 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

25 Always appreciate it; and to all of you once again.

26
27 And with that, we're going to go on to our second speaker, and that
28 is Mr. Robert Misseri, president and co-founder of Paws of War,
29 Help a Vet, Save a Pet. He will also provide us with the
30 organization's ongoing tasks and mission. I thank you for coming
31 out today, Robert. It's a pleasure, really, to have you here and
32 some of our special guests in the room, and they are beautiful.
33 They really are.

01:36PM 34

35 **MR. MISSERI:**

36 Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you to the distinguished --
37 everyone here that is part of this committee. It's an honor to be
38 before you all.

01:36PM 39

40 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

41 Oh. I'm sorry. I forgot. I'm sorry to interrupt you. Where is
42 Mr. Krupski? Where is Legislator Krupski? Al, I'm so -- I'm new
43 at this. All right? What can I tell ya? I know you had your hand
44 up for such a while. Did you want to address Mr. Ronayne or -- I'm
45 sorry.

46
47 **LEG. KRUPSKI:**

48 Yes, if I could, sure.

49
50 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

51 Oh, could, and if I missed anybody else, I apologize.

52
53 **LEG. KRUPSKI:**

54 No, no. As chairman, you are doing a great job. To have Director
55 Ronayne in here, I think we all appreciate his insight and
56 experience, but you always give the veterans the respect that they

1 deserve, so I appreciate your attitude towards, you know, the way
2 you run this committee, so thank you.

3
4 As far as Director Ronayne, you said something about the -- there's
5 a group that's being instructed at the Michael Murphy Museum. Who
6 is that?

7
8 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

9 The Lieutenant Michael Murphy Division of the Navy Sea Cadets.

10
11 **LEG. KRUPSKI:**

12 Is that like a junior ROTC program? I'm more familiar with ROTC
13 programs.

14
15 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

16 Kind of a junior ROTC light, if you will. It's not run through
17 schools. They are individual divisions. We have a number of them
18 throughout Long Island. The Michael Murphy Division actually
19 predates the museum or even the concept of the museum, so the
01:37PM 20 ability to invite them and bring them into the fold on that was
21 wonderful.

22
23 **LEG. KRUPSKI:**

24 Well, that's great. I'm sure it's doing the youth there an awful
25 lot of benefit, and it's much appreciated so thank you. And thank
26 you, Mr. Chair, again. Thank you for your running this the way you
27 do.

28
29 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

01:38PM 30 Thank you. I appreciate that, and, again, I apologize for
31 overlooking you again.

32
33 **LEG. KRUPSKI:**

34 No worries.

35
36 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

37 All right. Anybody else would like to address Mr. Ronayne? All
38 right. Well, for the third time. We are building up the suspense.

39
40 **MR. MISSERI:**

41 Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

42
43 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

44 Thank you, Rob.

45
46 **MR. MISSERI:**

47 And thank you, everybody here, and as far as Tom goes, unless
48 you're in the mix, you wouldn't understand the value of Tom's role
49 in this county. I talked to veterans and active members in
01:38PM 50 different states, and they're aware of him and the services that he
51 provides. It's amazing, and it gives us the ability as a
52 nongovernment agency to do our job and help so many more. Paws of
53 War is a non-for-profit and we are based out of Nesconset. Our
54 representative there is Leslie Kennedy. Thank you, and she gives
55 us great support as so many others. We are still a grassroots
56 organization. We get most of our funding, if not 99 percent of it

1 through organizations like Ray Meyers with Amvets and VFWs and we
2 -- the only government -- county money we receive, and we are very
3 grateful of it, is the Suffolk County Veterans Marathon and our
4 services include to start out with is service dogs and we have
5 three --
6

7 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

8 Yeah. Can we bring them up? Do you gentlemen mind bringing up
9 your friends up there? They are awesome. I had the pleasure of
01:39PM 10 meeting them earlier out in the auditorium lobby. Bring them by
11 the front here by the horseshoe so everyone can take a great look
12 and everyone at home can see them. Look at them.
13

14 **MR. MISSERI:**

15 I don't mean to put them on the spot, but Ron -- that's Milo. Ron
16 is struggling right now with cancer.
17

18 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

19 I'm sorry to hear that.
20

21 **MR. MISSERI:**

22 Milo actually detects his cancer levels, and he spends a great deal
23 with others at the V.A. on a regular basis. We have Kevin who has
24 now become one of our best volunteers at the organization, and
25 Kevin is also a 100-percent disabled veteran, and we have become a
26 family at Paws of War. It's a dress-down. We are always in casual
27 clothing, and our sessions are casual. Our doors are open 24/7.
28 Many of our veterans have keys. They can come at any time and Rob
29 Imprimo (ph) and Gracie. Rob has been with us for a little over
01:41PM 30 two years. Is it going on two years, Rob? Thank you, Rob. Rob
31 came in and if you don't mind me sharing, Rob came into my office.
32 We got a phone call from a doctor at the V.A. and if we would sit
33 with Rob, and we did, and Rob didn't look the way he did today and
34 he came in crutching something in his hand, and we actually had
35 Gracie in our facility at the time. We had just rescued her, and
36 Rob was holding something, and I thought it was a treat, and I'm
37 saying to my myself, Well, when is he going to give her the treat?
38 He was kind of quiet. He's not like what he was today, and I said,
39 "What do you have in your hand?" He said, "That's Saint Jude."
01:42PM 40 And he said this is a saint of lost causes. And fast forward,

41 Gracie has been with Rob, and we're very proud of all of our
42 veterans of course. You know most of us don't realize when we lose
43 a veteran on Long Island, sometimes it doesn't even make the
44 papers, and Tom could tell you that.
45

46 **DIRECTOR RONAYNE:**

47 Most times.
48

49 **MR. MISSERI:**

01:42PM 50 And we feel with our program and the other veterans helping each
51 other, our program is really working here on Long Island. And
52 that's just the one program that we initiate on a regular basis.
53 We also have a program for any active or military or veteran or
54 first responder here where will train their existing animal if it's
55 stressing them out or it's just out of control, we will provide
56 free training and they can work their way towards service or

1 whatever they may need. We also have a therapy dog program. Ron is
2 part of that program, so his dog plays a hybrid role,
3 multi-purpose, so he plays a role as a service dog as well as a
4 therapy dog, and they go to the V.A., they go to children's
5 hospitals as well as Rob has now been coming into the program, so
6 now it's giving our veterans another role to play and they are
7 giving back once again. We have a program called War Torn Pups.
8 This program is for active military all over the world. We are one
9 of the very few organizations in the world that can do this and do
01:44PM 10 this at no cost to our active military. We bring animals, cats,
11 and dogs from any war-torn area free of charge, of course. We get
12 that animal back here in America, and we reunite them. We just --
13 we had a unit stationed in Ukraine. We got a frantic call, and we
14 just got that cat out. The cat's name is Yogurt, and it was a unit
15 out of Florida that didn't even know they were in there. They
16 didn't know until Ron DeSantis came out and thanked the unit. Who
17 We got a cat out for a soldier who did not want to leave this cat
18 behind, and I believe we just posted it on our Facebook page. So
19 we are currently and actively always bringing our active military
01:45PM 20 animals back that they rescue while in deployment.

21
22 Helping Heroes is another program that's very aggressive here on
23 Long Island. It could be a working veteran that's just struggling
24 and he needs or she needs medical for an animal, cat or dog. It
25 could be something where when the snow hits heavy, we have a list
26 of older seniors, veterans that we get to their home, and we shovel
27 out their snow. We are helping someone right now, their bathroom
28 -- he's an 86-year-old Korean War veteran, has a service dog. His
29 bathroom is about to fall through the floor and we're helping him
01:45PM 30 right now renovate it, help from Ray and others, Home Depot. So
31 our programs are always, always active, and it's always one
32 connection. There is an animal always connected to what we do.

33
34 We also provide companion adoptions to any active, any veteran, any
35 first responder here. That includes anything from vaccinations.
36 There is never a fee, never an adoption fee, and we're constantly
37 providing those services here on the island.

38
39 You talked about homeless veterans, we deal with frequently. We
01:46PM 40 get phone calls where a veteran may be living in a car. There was a
41 veteran living a few years back, a veteran was living in Coram for
42 20 years. They couldn't get him out at all. He had about 35 cats
43 he was living with for 20 years, and we did it. We got him out.
44 We kept our commitment. We still feed those cats to this day every
45 single day twice a day. We are always engaging in the community,
46 and we are here for any veteran and we are constantly working with
47 agencies, of course like Tom, the V.A., who will call us and say, A
48 veteran tried to commit suicide, he is here going into unit 22, we
49 don't know what do with his dog. We will take that dog for six
01:47PM 50 months, three months, whatever it takes for him or her to get the
51 proper treatment; so we are always there for our veterans here on
52 Long Island.

53
54 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

55 Amazing work you guys do. Really, that's something else. Well,
56 it's great to know that all these services here and many, many more

1 in the county are available to our veterans. If you both can send
2 me, anything you have that I can post and share with my colleagues
3 to post on our sites, maybe we can spread the awareness that these
4 services are readily available to those who may not know and those
5 who may know someone in need. We all have access, and we have
6 social media, and we can get the message out there, and we would
7 love to assist you. Like I said, this is a partnership, and
8 there's many people out there who can use these services that,
9 again, may not be aware of it, and family members and friends, we
01:48PM 10 can get that message out. And anything we can do to help you
11 further, use and abuse us as well. All right? That's why we're
12 here, all right?

13
14 I appreciate you, Gentleman. I appreciate all of you in this room
15 today. Thank you for your services, and we thank your little furry
16 friends there who are doing a great service themselves. I'm going
17 to ask you to stay up -- remain here one more moment. I'd like to
18 get the committee members who are present, and maybe we can get the
19 other ones on the screen too in another photo. Yeah. I know we
01:48PM 20 got a couple questions, and then we've got to wrap this up because
21 we have Public Works as well. We have two people who would like to
22 say a few words, and I'm going to ask you gentlemen to just to stay
23 up here just another couple minutes, and we'll get a picture
24 together, and anyone in the auditorium who would like to come up
25 for this picture, please do so in just a minute.

26
27 First, I'm going to recognize Legislator Bridget Fleming. You're
28 muted, Brig. You're muted. Can she hear me? Can't hear you,
29 Brig. Oh, there you go.

30
31 **LEG. FLEMING:**

32 I don't know if you noticed moments ago, my laptop died, and I
33 traded in another laptop so thank you to my staff for being there
34 so quickly. What an incredible array of services you provide in
35 Paws of War. You mentioned Ukraine. I just wonder -- obviously,
36 this is a major humanitarian disaster. Half a million people have
37 already been displaced. That must be impacting a lot of family
38 pets. Is there a program that you're aware of that's underway that
39 we could be supportive of that might do the things that you talk
01:49PM 40 about that you do?

41
42 **MR. MISSERI:**

43 So right now in Ukraine, we have been working with our partners on
44 the ground that helped us get Yogurt out. The biggest problem
45 right now is the shelters. We are working with three shelters that
46 are there. They can't get the animals out of the shelter because
47 the roadblocks and they are out of gasoline, so we're trying to get
48 them into Poland through our resources in Poland, and we are hoping
49 by late, late tonight, their morning, we will have some more
01:50PM 50 direction but we are trying to help them.

51
52 **LEG. FLEMING:**

53 What agencies are participating in that? Where is the funding
54 coming from?

55
56 **MR. MISSERI:**

1 There is no agencies. Just like when we bring an animal back from
2 overseas, it's just us. It's our resources, years of resources
3 worldwide of other like-minded rescues and non-for-profits that
4 help us. So right now as far as we go, there's no agency currently
5 that's trying to get those animals out of those shelters into
6 Poland.

7
8 **LEG. FLEMING:**

01:51PM 9 Thank you for bringing it to our attention. And what about beyond
10 the shelters, just a -- I mean we are hearing and seeing footage of
11 families, you know, who are leaving their husbands and brothers and
12 sons behind and having to leave the country for their safety. Are
13 you aware of anything organized that's happening around their pets?
14

15 **MR. MISSERI:**

16 So that right now is going to be part of it, getting supplies into
17 also Ukraine, pet supplies, pet food as people are running out, and
18 there's a zoo that's in question right now. We should have more
19 information hopefully by late tonight, hopefully.
20

01:51PM 21 **LEG. FLEMING:**

22 If you think that there's a way that legislative offices can be
23 helpful to you with outreach -- Legislator Krupski and I just came
24 from Riverhead, a rally for Ukranians in Riverhead, and the church
25 there is doing collections of clothes and, you know, personal
26 hygiene items, and we volunteered to help with that at our
27 legislative offices. If there's anything that we can do around the
28 needs of the animals in the region, I wonder if you could maybe
29 disseminate that for us. You know, just let us know in our
30 legislative offices.
31

01:52PM 32 **MR. MISSERI:**

33 We can, absolutely.
34

35 **LEG. FLEMING:**

36 That would be very helpful. Thank you, and thank you for
37 everything you do, and thank you, Mr. Chair, for bringing in both
38 of these excellent presentations.
39

01:52PM 40 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

41 Thank you, Legislator Fleming. I appreciate that. I'm going to
42 recognize Legislator Kennedy.
43

44 **LEG. KENNEDY:**

45 Thank you. Robert did not express everything this organization
46 does. I am blessed to have them in my district. I have to say that
47 they are the experts in dealing with PTSD. Their volunteers,
48 Kelly, the gang, just the way they talk, they know what to look
49 for, they know what to ask. They have more empathy than I have
01:53PM 50 seen in other human being in a long, long time, and they work like
51 animals themselves. They're good people.
52

53 The last event I went to, and Mr. Ronayne was there also, was they
54 immunized pets, which is vitally important. It's a lot of money to
55 go to a vet. They had three volunteer veterinarians, I think,
56 there that worked and immunized the puppies and the kittens. It

1 was just amazing to see the people that volunteered there.

2
3 I think if they could use anything, it would be some donations -- I
4 don't know if I'm correct, Robert. You can answer that -- with
5 transportation costs and other things to get these animals home. I
6 I have to say they supplied a beautiful, wonderful animal for a
7 family of a veteran that is very close to me, and that pet is doing
8 an excellent job. So thank you for what you do, all of you. I
9 truly appreciate having you in my district, and you know we're
01:54PM 10 there for you. Thank you, Bridget. Thank you, Al. Thank you all
11 for volunteering to assist this great organization.
12

13 **MR. MISSERI:**

14 Thank you, Ms. Kennedy, for that very much.
15

16 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

17 Thank you, Legislator Kennedy. All right. Anybody else would like
18 to speak? Dominick. Legislator Thorne.
19

20 **LEG. THORNE:**

21 One of the things I thought I should ask you is do you have any
22 problem or do you need any legislature (sic) passed in the county,
23 do you have any problems with the ride shares, the service animals
24 going in ride share programs or public busses or any of the
25 transportation currently used by your veterans, is there any
26 legislative measures that we have to pass to ensure that the
27 service animal is accepted in those ride share programs as well as
28 any other transportation?
29

01:55PM 30 **MR. MISSERI:**

31 Not that I'm educated enough on at this time.
32

33 **LEG. THORNE:**

34 You let us know. We'll be more than happy to get that done. Thank
35 you.
36

37 **MR. MISSERI:**

38 Thank you.
39

01:55PM 40 **CHAIRMAN CARACAPPA:**

41 No worries. I appreciate that, Legislator Thorne. All right.
42 With that, we have no other business. I will invite everybody up
43 for a quick picture, and I want to thank you all for everything,
44 coming out today, the awesome information, presentations you did
45 today for us. We're going to take a quick picture with everybody,
46 and I look forward to working with you both in the future. This is
47 going to be great. I'm telling you, it's going to be great, so
48 thank you both very, very much for everything you do.
49

50 (The meeting was adjourned at 1:55 p.m.)
51
52
53
54
55
56

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