



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Lee M. Zeldin

Giving our Veterans the Peer Support They Need and Deserve: A Column by Senator Lee Zeldin

LEE M. ZELDIN June 2, 2014

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After the last mile of the parades have been walked and the barbeque flames have been extinguished—the flame of devotion to our veterans must be further extended. In honoring our veterans, those who have sacrificed the entirety of their lives to protect our own, it is critical that we carry the spirit of this past weekend with us far beyond a short holiday.

Memorial Day is about celebrating and remembering those who have lost their lives in service to our great nation. Words will never be enough to say thank you.

Yet, what better way to honor those we have lost than to ensure that their brothers and sisters in arms are treated with the highest caliber of respect and are afforded the very best care upon their return?

It is in this vein and in the memory of all those we have lost, that I have made our veterans one of my highest priorities throughout my time in office.

Suffolk County is home to one of the largest veterans' populations in any county in the nation. Because so many of our vets are burdened with the effects of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), it became clear that something needed to be done so that our heroes could enjoy the freedoms and liberties they had fought so hard to protect.

This is why, as part of the 2012-2013 state budget, with the help of local veterans and community leaders, we created the PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer Support Program. Named for a local hero, PFC Joseph Dwyer, who lost his own battle with PTSD, the unique program takes a peer-to-peer approach to helping our veterans adjust to life back home.

I am proud to report that since its inception, the Program's group meetings have had a total attendance of over 450 different veterans. Given the success of Suffolk County's initial pilot program, the Dwyer Program has since expanded to 12 counties throughout the state.

It's not always easy for family and friends to understand the demons haunting our veterans when they return home and it is sometimes even harder for our veterans to face those challenges feeling isolated and alone.

The peer support model is more important than medication. It delivers a very important message for a veteran with PTSD who may not realize just how much love and support exists within their own community.

As we reflect on what this past holiday means, we are encouraged to not only pause in thanks and remembrance of our lost heroes, but to also forever honor those who have fallen by supporting those who have returned.

Our nation would not be what it is without the physical and mental sacrifices made by so many. God Bless America and thank you for all that you do!

For more information on the Dwyer Program, please visit <http://www.nysenate.gov/senator/lee-m-zeldin>, email vetpeertopeer@suffolkcountyny.gov or call 631-853-8345.