



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Robert G. Ortt

Ortt Announces New Funding to Expand and Continue Dwyer Program for Veterans

ANTOINETTE DELBEL April 27, 2017

| ISSUE: **VETERAN PROGRAMS, VETERANS, PTSD, SUBSTANCE ABUSE TREATMENT AND RECOVERY**



LOCKPORT – In a joint effort to further improve mental health and well-being among veterans, State Senator Rob Ortt (R,C,I – North Tonawanda) today joined local veterans, veterans service representatives and Niagara County officials to announce that he has secured \$185,000 in support of the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program in Niagara County, which offers support to veterans.

A total of \$3.1 million has been secured as part of the 2017-18 State Budget to expand the Dwyer program to other counties throughout the state. This year's \$185,000 in state Senate funding builds upon the amount Senator Ortt secured in both FY 2016 and FY 2017 to implement the veterans peer support program in Niagara County. This brings the total amount to \$555,000 for Niagara County's Dwyer program.

As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Mental Health, member of the Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security and Military Affairs, and a combat veteran, Senator Ortt highlighted the importance of service members seeking a healthy mental state after returning from service.

Senator Ortt said, "As someone who served in Afghanistan and sits on the Senate's Mental Health Committee, I know that peer-to-peer support is critically important for veterans suffering from the physical and emotional scars of war. The Dwyer Peer Support Program connects veterans with the support services they need to successfully transition from military to civilian life. I am proud to see this program flourish and succeed in Niagara County while helping to reduce the stigma for seeking care. It is our responsibility to continue to provide the necessary resources to help our veterans lead full and productive lives after they have risked so much to defend ours."

The Dwyer Peer Support Program is a non-clinical program that offers peer-to-peer support opportunities to veterans who may have experienced challenges after service, or who are looking to retain the spirit of camaraderie and connectedness. The Dwyer program provides outreach, education and peer support; builds resiliency among peers; encourages a connection among family, friends, and community; provides access to suicide prevention/intervention initiatives; and fosters hope among veterans, service members, and military families.

An estimated 20 veterans take their own lives every day nationwide – a decrease from the 22 a day reported in 2015. The Dwyer program offers access to suicide prevention/intervention initiatives through community partners and linkages through non-clinical engagement.

The Dwyer program operates out of the Veterans One-stop Center (VOC) of Western New York in Lockport – a collaborative effort between the VOC of WNY, Niagara County Veterans Service Agency and the Niagara County Department of Mental Health. Since its implementation, more than 600 veterans have made connections through programs, social activities, community service and volunteer work.

Local veteran Greg Conrad has struggled with substance abuse and mental health issues related to his service in the Army. He said the Dwyer program has helped him on his path to recovery.

Conrad said, “I’m thankful for the Dwyer program here in Lockport. It’s allowed me to make connections with other veterans who understood my inner struggles, and that has helped me get back on my feet. I can say I’m in a much better state of mind thanks to the programs, peer support and camaraderie offered through Dwyer.”

Niagara County Legislator Wm. Keith McNall, R-Lockport said, “Keeping our promise to our veterans is one of the most important obligations of our government. Repaying the debt we owe our returning heroes means ensuring they are able to reenter our community with the respect they are due—and the Dwyer program’s ‘peer-to-peer’ approach accomplishes that.”

Niagara County Clerk Joe Jastrzemski said, “I want to thank Senator Ortt for providing us with this generous funding opportunity. This provides not only a way to give back to our Niagara County veterans, but also cultivates relationships between our heroes and their communities. Niagara County is proud to be able to carry on this beneficial and crucial

program for our veterans.”

Veterans One-stop Center President & CEO Roger L. Woodworth said, “We thank the New York State Senate, as well as Senator Ortt for his efforts to secure this funding on behalf of Niagara County Veterans, service members, and military families. Additionally, the efforts of the Niagara County Legislature, the Niagara County Clerk’s Office, the Niagara County Department of Mental Health, and the Niagara County Veterans Services for allowing us to implement this impactful program. By bringing together community partners, we are able to empower passion, purpose, and hope in Niagara County’s Veterans. This program is a significant component of our holistic efforts and is critical to fostering connections throughout our community. We look forward to participating in the program’s continued success on behalf of our Veterans.”

Niagara County Veterans Service Agency Director Nina Cabrera said, “We have a commitment to provide the best support services possible to our veterans who have sacrificed so much to protect our country and our freedoms. The Dwyer program allows our heroes to open up to other vets who understand the stresses of war and how that can continue upon returning home. We’re thankful we’re able to continue this program to help our veterans lead happy and healthy lives.”

Director of Niagara County Department of Mental Health Laura Kelemen said, “Peer-to-peer support, such as the Joseph P. Dwyer Program, has helped to break down the stigma of seeking help for mental health illnesses. Veterans, who uniquely understand the experience of serving, provide support, encouragement, and advocacy to fellow veterans on a path toward recovery and healing. The Niagara County Department of Mental Health is proud to continue to ensure that those who served our country receive care for all of their injuries, both physical and psychological.”

The Dwyer program is named after PFC Joseph Dwyer, who enlisted in the Army within days following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. An Army medic, PFC Dwyer and his unit were deployed to Iraq in support Operation Iraqi Freedom. PFC Dwyer returned home after serving honorably, but was never the same. Due to complications from PTSD, and battling substance abuse and depression, PFC Dwyer passed away on June 28, 2008 at the age of 31. He is survived by his wife Matina Dwyer, and daughter, Meagan.