



PFC

**JOSEPH DWYER**

PROGRAM | 2014

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New York State Senator  
**Lee M. Zeldin**

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## Introduction

Suffolk County is home to the largest population of veterans in New York, and has one of the largest veterans' populations of any county in the United States.

Because many veterans live with the effects of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), it became clear that a program was needed to provide peer-to-peer support to these heroes.

As a result, the PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer Support Program was created as part of the 2012-2013 state budget to help veterans meet with other veterans in a secure, comfortable atmosphere to help each other cope with the effects of PTSD and TBI. The Vet-to-Vet approach of the Program allows for complete anonymity without fear of reprisal. Since its inception, this Program has provided proper support to veterans and most importantly, saved lives.

The Program is funded through New York State and administered on the county level in Suffolk through the County Veterans' Service Agency. The hard work and dedication of all those involved is reflected in this report.



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## **PFC Joseph Dwyer, United States Army 1977-2008**

PFC Joseph Dwyer 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 of Operation Iraqi Freedom. During their combat mission to Baghdad, a photographer for the Military Times newspaper captured this image of PFC Dwyer cradling a wounded Iraqi boy.



The photo expressed everything about why PFC Dwyer wanted to serve his country. This image became iconic and graced the pages of newspapers across the country, acting as a perfect symbol of the American soldier's dedication to duty.

PFC Dwyer returned home, after serving honorably, but he was never the same. Due to complications from PTSD, consumed by his own demons and battling with 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.





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## Making Ground - The creation of the Blue Ribbon John P. Jennings Veterans' Advisory Panel

State Senator Lee Zeldin, currently a Major in the U.S. Army Reserves, announced the creation of the John P. Jennings Veterans' Advisory Panel in early 2011, to assist with the creation of a program to assist our veterans community.

The panel was named in honor John P. Jennings, a Suffolk County resident who passed away on January 10, 2011. John struggled with the effects of PTSD following a deployment to Iraq, where he served as a First Lieutenant in the United States Army, Company A, 69th Infantry, Mechanized, as well as the New York National Guard 101st Cavalry.

John Jennings had a passion for public service and was dedicated to the organizations that strived, as he did, to make New York and Long Island a better place to live. John was posthumously awarded the Liberty Medal from the State of New York.

### **The members of the panel include:**

Chairman, LW Murphy	Rick Cunha
Hatty Baldwin	Dorine Kenney
Thomas Ronayne	Tim Sherer
John Javis	John Miller
Michael Stoltz	Richard Woltman
William Rodriguez	Tom Bergin
Chris Delaney	Dennis O'Donnell
Reggie Cornelia	Kate Demeglio
Jim McElroy	Allison Scerri
Raul Jimenez	Steve Maielli
Rosemary Fegreus	Pat Hughes
Sal Scarlato	Edgar Hernandez
Leo Belanger	George Llanos
Sidney Lynn	Linda Caginalp
George Egan	Frank Ciulla
John Mauro	Frank Dowling, M.D.
Joanne Lombardi	Brian Belz
John Lynch	Cindy Ventura
Thomas Pyatt	Karin Moran
Tom DeLuca	Kenneth Nevor
Gary Vertichio	Tim Porter
Grace Colucci	John Digilio







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## Establishment of the PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer-To-Peer Support Program

During negotiations on the 2012-2013 New York State Budget, Senator Zeldin, the first Iraq War veteran to serve in the New York State Legislature, and Senator Roy McDonald, the Chairman of the Senate Committee on Mental Health at that time, secured funding to create the PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer Support Program in four pilot counties: Suffolk, Jefferson, Rensselaer, and Saratoga. The Program was designed for veterans experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or living with Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) as a result of their military service.

The purpose of the Program was to design and implement a peer-based veterans program with the following goals:

- ★ pursue outreach and education
- ★ provide peer support
- ★ build resiliency among peers
- ★ encourage a connection among family, friends, and community
- ★ provide access to suicide prevention/intervention initiatives; and
- ★ foster hope

To provide maximum flexibility, each county would design and implement their Veteran Peer-to-Peer Program independent of each other with the same like-minded goal: to assist all veterans living with PTSD and TBI.

It is believed that this is the only such state-government created program in the nation.

## The Mental Wounds of War

Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) is a mental health condition with a severe type of anxiety that can occur after one has gone through an extreme emotional trauma, such as that of war.

Symptoms can include flashbacks and nightmares, as well as uncontrollable thoughts of a past event. Many veterans with PTSD have difficulty coping and, in some cases, the symptoms can worsen. Getting treatment as soon as possible can prevent long-term effects.





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## Implementation of the Dwyer Pilot Program in Suffolk County

Suffolk County Veterans Service Coordinator Thomas Ronayne began planning the rollout of the Dwyer Program in Suffolk almost immediately after the adoption of the 2012-2013 State Budget. The project began running support groups in mid-January 2013. For several months prior, planning was focused on project design, staff recruitment and training.

There were 111 unique group meeting participants from June 2013 through November 2013. Thirty-eight veterans were served individually by Dwyer Project Veteran staff mentors during the same period. Not included in these numbers were veterans served by individual mentoring/support contacts or by the earlier groups, which were located at homeless programs but also served community veterans.

The Dwyer Program has a presence on the County Veterans' Service Agency website (<http://www.suffolkcountyny.gov/veterans/Home.aspx>), as well as that of Suffolk County United Veterans (<http://www.scuv.org>). It also has its own Facebook page which has helped to connect with younger veterans, <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Joseph-P-Dwyer-Veterans-Peer-Support-Project/493464977376811>. Program staff have attended dozens of veterans events across Suffolk County to promote the Program, including running competitions, Bike Runs, Car Shows, and a range of Veterans Day, Memorial Day, and July 4th events.

This outreach has made for hundreds of meaningful conversations to help spread the word of the Dwyer Project through the veterans community.

The Program has been widely covered by media including several articles in Newsday, radio interviews, News12 stories, and local newspaper articles.

The Suffolk County PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer-to-peer Support Program  
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[vetpeertopeer@suffolkcountyny.gov](mailto:vetpeertopeer@suffolkcountyny.gov)



## 2013-2014 State Budget Program Expansion

In March 2013, Senator Zeldin fought for and obtained additional funding to expand the Program to seven additional counties - Erie, Nassau, Onondaga, Orange, Putnam, Rockland, and Westchester. Meanwhile, Suffolk County continued to grow.

As of November 2013, the Suffolk County Program had conducted 148 group sessions.

There were 85 group meetings convened with a total attendance of 450, averaging 5.3 participants per meeting. Total documented and unique attendance at all meetings for this period was 111. Though not consistently documented for all meeting attendees, percentage by era served is as follows:

World War II: .....	5%
Korea: .....	12%
Vietnam: .....	31%
Desert Shield/Desert Storm: .....	17%
OIF/OEF/OND: .....	25%
Peacetime: .....	20%

Individual contacts, apart from group meetings, were variably and sporadically documented until development of a revised Contact and Critical Incident Form for documenting individual contacts was issued to staff in September 2013. Data for reported contacts is summarized here for the period June 2013 through November 2013:

Number of Documented Individual Contacts:	48
Number of Unduplicated Veterans Encountered:	38*

38 separate and distinct veterans were seen for a total of 48 contacts (i.e. some had more than one face to face contact).

*\*This count includes veterans seen for first contact and already participating in a support group.*





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## Program Profiles - “The Human Touch”

### Success Story #1

“Our group has established a habit of doing a “Round of Gratitude” at each meeting. It’s designed to remind ourselves there is much to be grateful for in spite of life’s difficulties and the importance of keeping a positive attitude. Recently, we finished a meeting with a Round of Gratitude that was made remarkable by one of our members. This person has suffered some recent losses among his closest family members that would have left most of us paralyzed with grief. And, he has had a difficult life that would, to many, seem hopeless. His persona, when he first came to the group, was that of a tough guy with whom no one should approach. Yet, when his turn came to express his gratitude he said: ‘I’m grateful for this group. It has changed my life. Please don’t ever stop these meetings.’

Other group members have expressed similar sentiments. A sense of camaraderie has emerged that draws them to the meetings, where they can speak without judgment and find support from their fellow vets that goes beyond relationships in their homeless veterans housing residences and treatment groups at the VA Hospital. It is their group, where they can speak openly and learn from each other’s life experience.”

### Success Story #2

“A highly decorated, 32 year old Iraq War veteran was homeless in Maryland and struggling to cope with re-integrating into civilian life. He struggled with depression, alcoholism, and PTSD. It wound up costing him his marriage and separation from his child. His parents, who live in Suffolk County, heard about the Vets Place (a homeless shelter for veterans) in Yaphank, NY and referred their son. Upon entering the Vets Place, this veteran was asked to attend the newly formed PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer-to-Peer Veterans Support group.

At his first meeting with the group, he stated that this program was unlike any other and he would say, “I got a real good feeling about this program.” His progress was rapid and crystal clear. He started off shy and quickly became a leader in the group. His PTSD symptoms were greatly reduced. He was able to formulate a plan for his life and within weeks he received veterans’ financial benefits and moved to Florida with housing and employment opportunities. The only sad thing about this story is that we who remain in this group miss our brother and his impact on all of us. But we are very proud of the PFC Joseph Dwyer Program and the success it has had in a very short period of time.”







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## Going Forward

In collaboration with the Rosen Center for Military families, the PFC Joseph Dwyer Program is rolling out introductory workshops for veteran family members.

Expectations are that these meetings will lead to the need for more group services for couples, extended family members, and children – with an emphasis on those who have endured emotional and/or transitional wounds of war.

These may also include partnerships with community volunteers who have offered activity-based recovery services such as Yoga, meditation, equine-assisted therapies, art and music therapies, and more.

The Program is now firmly established and continues to grow as we request continued funding in this year's state budget. It is crucial that we have the funding in place so the county can start working on long term sustainability and developing more public-private partnerships.

The PFC Joseph Dwyer Program is protecting lives, marriages and families. If you raise your hand willing to lay down your life in defense of our freedoms and liberties, you deserve support when you return home with the physical and mental wounds of war.





