



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Lee M. Zeldin

Bi-Partisan Group of Lawmakers Announce Agreement on Legislation to Limit Protests at Military Funerals

LEE M. ZELDIN June 10, 2011

| ISSUE: **VETERANS**



Albany, NY- A bi-partisan group of lawmakers, including Senator Lee M. Zeldin (R, C, I-Shirley), Senator Joseph Griffo (R, C, I- Rome), Assemblyman Michael Cusick (D-Staten Island) and Assemblyman Dean Murray (R, C- East Patchogue) announced today a agreement on legislation to limit protests at Military Funerals (The Dignity Act).

Senator Zeldin and Assemblyman Murray will be part of an announcement in front of the Suffolk County Veterans community that will take place later today at **5pm** at V.F.W. Post 9486, 55 Lake Shore Road, Lake Ronkonkoma, NY 11779.

Senator Zeldin proposed the Specialist Thomas J. Wilwerth Military Dignity Act this past March. Specialist Wilwerth was an Iraq War Veteran who lost his life in combat in 2006. Senators Zeldin and Griffo introduced two companion bills, which passed the Senate on March 14, 2011. The two bills were amended and passed by the Assembly this past Monday, June 6, 2011. The Senate will consider these bills before the end of Session on June 20th.

One of the bills (S.5605/A.7698) triples the buffer zone distance for protests around a religious service, funeral, burial or memorial service from 100 feet to 300 feet. The second bill (S.5602/A.7697) requires the development and implementation of a permit process for demonstrations at veteran and veteran family member funerals, and authorizes the imposition of fines for failure to comply with the permit provisions.

“I am proud of the bi-partisan work of my colleagues in making this initiative a reality,” said Senator Zeldin. “This very important legislation protects our future Gold Star families by ensuring dignity, respect and honor for their fallen military veteran.”

“Exercising free speech is an American right, but it is a tremendous misuse of that freedom to use the funerals of our veterans as a vehicle for protests that do nothing but add to the grief and sorrow of military families,” said Senator Joseph A. Griffo (R, C, IP– Rome). “Grieving military families shouldn’t be the target of a political demonstration.”

“Freedom of speech is a sacred right in the United States,” said Assemblyman Cusick (D- Staten Island). “However, we have a compelling interest to protect the rights of mourners. That is exactly what we are doing with this legislation. Men and women that have died in the service of our country deserve, at the very least, to be laid to rest in peace.”

“Our young men and women in the military put their lives on the line for our nation. Those who make the ultimate sacrifice should be guaranteed the right to be buried with honor and dignity,” said Assemblyman Murray. “This legislation accomplishes that, and protects the families of these selfless heroes, while protecting the first amendment rights that they laid down their lives protecting.”

“Veterans, throughout history have unselfishly placed their lives on the line for freedom, when they die in battles or just pass on, they and their families deserve the respect and dignity that was earned on our behalf. It is only proper that we allow them to be waked and buried without any distractions or demonstrations that would only disrespect the Honor that these Veterans deserve. Thank you Senator Zeldin. You and your fellow legislators in New York are to be commended for your efforts with this Bill,” said Michael Pascal, Past District 1 Commander, Veterans of Foreign Wars.

“This legislation takes into consideration the free speech rights of those who choose to protest military funerals with hateful rhetoric and tactics. We must balance that right with the need to protect our gold star families and allow them to peacefully mourn the loss of their military hero and loved one. I am pleased to announce this agreement and I respectfully request Governor Cuomo’s swift action in signing this into law,” concluded Senator Zeldin.