



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Lee M. Zeldin

Remember Our Veterans This Memorial Day

LEE M. ZELDIN May 24, 2012

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Memorial Day is a time to pause for reflection and remembrance of our many brave veterans who have fought and died to protect the rights and liberties we all enjoy as Americans. For over two hundred years, patriots have time and again answered our country's call to defend our constitution, freedoms, and liberties. Some courageously paid the ultimate price.

This is a distinctly American holiday. Throughout history, instances of free peoples are fleeting moments—even that of our own country is brief in comparison to the history of mankind. The men and women of our Armed Forces understand this and stand ready to defend the fragile flame of liberty. From the Minutemen of Massachusetts to the servicemembers in the Mountains of Afghanistan, our veterans have time and again fought for us. We must never forget.

Everyday, our Military Servicemembers return home from the battlefield—some with the wounds of war, both mental and physical. They come back to their loved ones and everyday lives but carry their scars with them. It is our duty, as citizens of the Republic that they fought so hard to defend, to care for our veterans and help ensure that they are able to enjoy their freedom as well. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) are affecting countless soldiers returning home from deployment. Many have nowhere to turn.

When I first campaigned for Senate in 2010, I pledged to fight for our veterans in Albany and spearhead an initiative called the PFC Joseph Dwyer Program. Upon taking office, I, along with many local leaders and veterans, commissioned the John P. Jennings Veterans' Advisory Panel, with the purpose of crafting a framework for the Dwyer Program. One of the primary conclusions of our Panel was that New York State should help provide peer-to-peer support for our servicemembers suffering from PTSD & TBI. Many times, having a person there with you, who has gone through the same struggles as you, who has been deployed, and gone through the hardships of re-integrating into our community, is the lifeline our veterans need.

The panel is named in the honor of Infantryman John P. Jennings, a Suffolk County resident who passed away on January 10, 2011. He struggled with the effects of PTSD following a deployment to Iraq from September 2004 to October 2005. PFC Dwyer enlisted in the Army within days of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. He served with courage and honor in Iraq, but returned home with PTSD. On June 28, 2008, this illness took his life, leaving behind his wife, Matina, and their two-year-old daughter, Meagan. The Dwyer Program, and future programs like it, will help prevent the loss of heroes like PFC Dwyer and Infantryman Jennings and I am proud to have worked with my colleagues in the Senate Majority to secure its funding in the 2012-13 State Budget.

Not only is it important to honor our veterans suffering from the mental and physical wounds of war, but we must also honor those fallen heroes coming home to be laid to rest. The notion that we need to craft laws to defend against the desecration of the funeral services of our veterans is absurd. Unfortunately, this is the reality we face. We have heard countless stories of groups like the Westboro Baptist Church who have dishonored our fallen heroes by tormenting their loved ones. After the Snyder v. Phelps court decision, I pledged to work to correct this injustice by crafting state legislation that would balance freedom of

speech with the need to protect our gold star families and allow them to peacefully mourn the loss of their military hero. The Thomas J. Wilwerth Military Dignity Act, which I was proud to have introduced in the Senate and see signed into law, did just that by limiting these types of protests at military funerals.

As a Captain in the U.S. Army Reserve and as your State Senator, I am fighting to protect, care for, and honor our veterans. This Memorial Day, when we see a veteran this weekend, and any opportunity that follows, let's take a moment, shake their hand, and let them know we are grateful for their service.