

COUNTY OF SUFFOLK



OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Steven Bellone
SUFFOLK COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Thomas Ronayne, Director
VETERANS SERVICE AGENCY

Friday August 14, 2020

Testimony before a Joint Committee Hearing of the New York State Senate and New York State Assembly Committees on Veterans Affairs, Homeland Security and Military Affairs

The Honorable John Brooks, Chairman
NYS Senate Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security and Military Affairs
The Honorable Didi Barrett, Chairwoman
NYS Assembly Committee on Veterans Affairs

I genuinely thank Senator Brooks and Assemblywoman Barrett, their respective Committees and the many staff and support personnel who make this work possible. Thank you for the opportunity to offer testimony at this important hearing.

Senator Brooks, Thank You sir for your service in uniform as a member of the United States Army Nation Guard.

New York State, as home to one of the nation's largest veteran populations and the county that I represent, Suffolk County, owning the single largest veteran population in New York State, have not only a significant responsibility but I believe obligation to identify, understand and serve our veterans needs at the very highest level.

It would be shortsighted and wrong to view our veteran population without also acknowledging the family members and loved ones in the veterans' lives. To approach much of the work that we are charged with and to not recognize the loved ones who both influence and are influenced by the veteran is to provide an incomplete effort to meet the needs of this extraordinary population.

In the context of my remarks today I will largely limit my remarks to the effects of Covid and its effect on the veteran's population of Suffolk County and certainly New York State as a whole.

- Veterans, as a group, are generally considered to be adaptive and resilient. I would agree that this is the case for many but certainly not all veterans. In fact, it is often our most vulnerable veterans who are least able to adapt to sudden change and certainly to urgent or emergent situations. Covid certainly qualifies under that description.
- An area of significant impact relating to Covid has been a striking increase in veterans unemployment resulting from workplace and general economic disruptions resulting from Covid.

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- Veterans, to include National Guard and NY Air Guard have lost their (civilian) jobs and as a result have in some cases become housing insecure due to lost income.
- Veterans, to include National Guard and NY Air Guard have recently become food insecure as a result of lost or interrupted employment due to Covid.
- Veterans, to include National Guard and NY Air Guard have recently become financially insecure as a result of Covid.
 - These examples speak to a significant concern with regard to veteran's wellness within the community. Many veterans who now find themselves housing, food or financially insecure have also lost their employer provided health care and other benefits.
 - The loss of these benefits has resulted in a considerable increase in the numbers of veterans (all era's) who are now presenting for VA and other services by veterans who have not previously been consumers of veterans services, to include VA, State Divisions of Veterans Services and County Veterans Service Agencies. Clearly this places additional resource and logistical burdens on already taxed State and County resources.
- During Covid, we have seen increases in calls to Crisis Lines and Suicide Prevention Lines by as much as 25%.
- During Covid, we have observed increases in alcohol and substance misuse.
- During Covid we have seen an increase in the number of DV (Domestic Violence) cases.
- Covid has compounded the often complex task of identifying and delivering access to services to our women veterans

An area of significant concern has been accessibility by veterans to essential services. While Suffolk County has maintained emergency planning protocols that permitted us to effectively engage our communities very early on in the Covid emergency, other partners demonstrated that they were not as adequately prepared. Prior planning, to include appropriate training of human resources, understanding and developing basic emergency equipment and supply needs, proper training on this equipment to ensure qualification of line staff and end users, pre-placement of these resources, contingency (Plan B) plan(s) to mitigate unknown and unforeseen circumstances and effective communication and public awareness tools.

Our first responsibility in government is to provide for the safety of our constituencies. It is only through proper planning, effective leadership and the ability to be resilient and strategically resourceful that we might succeed in executing that mission.

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- Suffolk County maintains effective inter-governmental relationships not only among county agencies but with the myriad governmental partner throughout our county, region and state.
- Strong and effective communications permitted Suffolk County to engage with NYS on numerous critical issues, an example of effective partnerships benefitting from effective leadership.
- A commitment level and frankly, a workforce who feel both engaged AND safe. A vulnerable workforce is a distracted workforce and that diminishes efficacy.
- While there are numerous positive examples of collaboration it is also true that there were and continue to be, gaps in access to services and service providers.
 - VA has been a challenge for both veterans and veteran’s advocates (County and State Veterans Service Agencies and Divisions) to effectively access.
 - While routinely citing the exponential growth of Tele-Medicine as the resource of choice for veterans to access care during Covid, there are countless veterans who cannot, do not or will not embrace this technology.
 - Tele-Medicine, despite its many positive attributes lacks the “connectivity” that many patients, veteran and non-veteran alike, crave and expect from their encounters with care providers.
 - At the Northport VAMC there was a significant absence of promised devices (2 devices) made available to veterans as late as early June.
 - VA cited outreach as a primary tool used to inform and engage veterans during the first months of the Covid emergency. Unfortunately, per the PIO at Northport VAMC, “all outreach had been suspended” at the beginning of the Covid emergency.
 - Any outreach ultimately performed was to veterans already enrolled and being served by VA (32% of America’s veterans had a relationship with VA prior to Covid) and did not engage the majority of veterans who are not VA enrolled, many of whom have not been prior consumers of VA or other veterans services. With increasing unemployment and loss of health care benefits, many of these veterans who now have a specific need for these services were not and are not being engaged by VA.
 - Access to VA facilities was effectively closed for a significant period of time at the beginning of Covid. Examples such as Emergency Departments not accepting veterans without appointments, acute MH Units not permitting advocates to meet with veteran clients and other challenges to access severely curtailed the ability of the Veterans Services community from providing necessary and essential services.

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State Veterans Home at Stonybrook:

The Long Island State Veterans Home at Stonybrook is a model, not only locally but nationally of how a Veterans Skilled Nursing Facility caring for America's heroes should be operated. The facility is also home to one of the 4 offices of Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency.

Caring for the needs of the 350 residents of LISVH is altogether an honor, a privilege and a humbling duty.

It is for these reasons that the horrible effects of Covid, the truly tragic number of deaths at this facility, the impact on the wellness of the residents throughout the facility, the families of residents (no visitation has taken place since early March) and the remarkable staff are so amplified for us here in Suffolk and throughout NYS.

A congregant living environment poses unique challenges under ordinary circumstances, during a pandemic, much more so. The rapid spread of infection, the challenges to understanding the sources of virus intrusion into the facility and the herculean task of keeping residents and staff as safe as possible were all unprecedented here.

While Suffolk County does not administer this facility, we do maintain and operate a VSA office at this facility and have a deep operational relationship with LISVH.

A significant concern that will impact, and potentially further traumatize residents of LISVH and the surviving family members of veterans who succumbed to Covid at the facility is what we anticipate will be a challenging and contentious process of securing survivor benefits for the more than 100 widows or widowers effected by a VA policy concerning awarding survivor (Dependents Indemnification Compensation, or DIC) benefits. There are very specific guidelines as to eligible Cause of Death (COD) determinations that qualify for this benefit. Given that Covid, as an opportunistic virus, exacerbated the comorbidity or underlying conditions of many veterans who did not survive, Covid is listed as COD on the death certificates of these cases. Unless or until VA adds Covid with approved secondary or contributing COD's as acceptable conditions, we anticipate that most, if not all of cases will result in denials requiring appeals or supplemental actions to remedy the erroneous (in our opinion) denials of these very important benefits.

Suffolk County, being home to New York States largest veteran population places an extremely high priority on being both accessible and effective in serving veterans, active duty service members, national guard, reserves, their dependents, families and survivors. This can only be accomplished through the leveraging of resources at all levels of government and the larger community provider and not for profit agencies throughout our county.

A reality of the work performed by Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency is the limitations of resources, specifically funding. As the veteran population ages and with the Post 9/11 trend of deploying American service-members multiple times we are experiencing both an increase in the numbers of new

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veterans presenting for services as well as experiencing a considerable increase in both the complexity and the severity of claims being prosecuted by our offices. These factors have resulted in more Veterans Service Officer (VSO) time expended to develop, research and manage cases and a heightened need for more frequent and more advanced training to allow a minimum standard of excellence in managing these cases.

None of the above factors the increases of veterans presenting as a result of Covid induced factors I describe above. As these new veterans present, our resources will become more strained.

Financial support from New York State is essential to our being able to perform our mission.

As we have similarly experienced, the resources and available funding of the many county agencies that we interface with on a daily basis are also strained and they too require financial supports to enable them to continue to both serve their core demographics as well as provide necessary supports to the Veterans Service Agency. It is not just veteran services that will be severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Counties and all their various departments and agencies all across New York have been on the frontlines of the COVID-19 pandemic, and county employees, such as our veteran service officers, public health nurses, police officers, and more have been going above and beyond to provide vital services to residents in need.

To put it in perspective, due to the unprecedented loss of revenues and increased cost associated with the pandemic, Suffolk County will be forced to close a budget gap of more than \$1.1 billion in the next 14 months. In the worst case scenario that factors in a potential second wave and business closures, Suffolk County could face a staggering \$1.5 billion total shortfall over a similar time period.

No one could have predicted this financial emergencies, but Counties such as Suffolk need immediate assistance to deal with this unprecedented financial damage and recover quickly. If the federal government does not deliver federal disaster assistance, essential employees will be the ones to pay the price. The very County employees, first responders, doctors and nurses that have been on the frontlines for the last 5 months will be the ones to bear the brunt of this financial crisis.

If the federal government denies Counties the needed assistance, they will effectively be defunding public safety and public health, and that means defunding our veterans. We want to avoid at all costs cutting critical services that are needed now more than ever and the other painful actions that are inevitable if Counties aren't provided relief.

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In summary, Suffolk County has worked extremely hard, before, during and certainly continuing as we emerge from the Covid emergency. The solemn obligation that we hold regarding serving those who have served us is a significant undertaking.

Suffolk County, as the first Mayors Challenge County in New York State, one of 4 participating County's in the NYS DOH Suicide Fatality Review, the founding County of the Joseph Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program and the NYS Governors Challenge understands that our collective work is far from done.

Rebuilding the wellness, resiliency and economy of our communities, county and state post Covid will require extraordinary effort across the spectrum of partners.

Whether ensuring primary health care for veterans, mental health care, mental health wellness, employment, housing and homeless needs, food insecurity and countless other areas, we in Suffolk County stand ready to face these challenges.

NYS Division of Veterans Services is an exceptional and indispensable partner as are so many local and statewide partners. Without these "battle buddies" we all enter the fight underprepared, together, we can accomplish much.

Administrative, resource and financial supports from New York State are essential to our chances at success and I implore these committees to fully embrace the urgency of these needs as we move forward.

Respectfully submitted,

Thomas Ronayne, Director