

**COUNTY OF SUFFOLK**



**OFFICE OF THE COUNTY EXECUTIVE**

**Steven Bellone**  
SUFFOLK COUNTY EXECUTIVE

**Thomas Ronayne, Director**  
VETERANS SERVICE AGENCY

The Honorable David Carlucci  
Chairman, Committee on Mental Health  
New York State Senate

June 3, 2019

**Re: Public Hearing on Suicide and Suicide Prevention**  
**Submission of written testimony relating to Suicide and Suicide**  
**Prevention among Veterans in the State of New York**

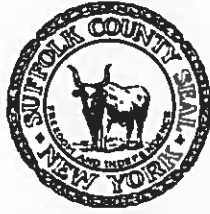
**Senator and Committee Members,**

I thank you for accepting my written testimony for inclusion in the record of your Joint Public Hearing scheduled to take place on Tuesday June 4, 2019.

I thank you for being a longtime supporter of the Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans Peer Support Program, I am grateful for the very effective support that you have consistently provided the veterans community of Suffolk County and all of New York State. Programs such as Dwyer have proven to be essential to the wellbeing of veterans across the state and it has been through strong advocacy on your part and other members of the Legislature that we, as advocates and leaders in the community have the ability to most effectively serve our mutual constituency.

As you are aware, the veterans of New York State and across the United States are facing a crisis.

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Serving in a military fatigued by nearly two decades of war, the brave young, and many not so young, members of our Armed Forces today face many challenges. In many instances these are unique to the historical model of military service in the United States.

Multiple deployments, an all-volunteer military, unprecedented reliance on National Guard, Air Guard Forces and other factors have conspired to create a population of service members and veterans requiring services and programs not historically considered.

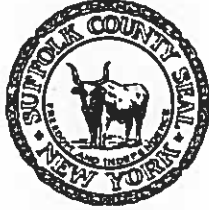
Suffolk County, while proudly home to the largest veteran population of any NYS county, has no active duty component, only National Guard and Reserve. As such, we lack the infrastructure (as do many NY county's) typically associated with a large veteran or military presence.

These include a base or command medical center (very different than VA) a Chaplaincy, family and dependent supportive services, PX or Commissary, transportation, housing, schools or mil/vet cultural awareness and competencies within area schools and more.

As such, the significant need for these and other services and the provision of these services falls to the community...the County.

One characteristic of a strong reliance on National Guard and Air Guard forces is that, very often, upon completion of the federalized mission, these troops immediately return to their state component. This requires that services and supports typically provided by the parent Unit or Department of Defense must be assumed by the Guard, Air Guard (read; NYS) or the County in which the member resides.

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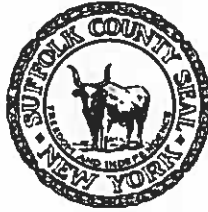
The needs of this community are every bit as complex and costly as the needs of returning regular active Duty troops. In fact, it can be reasonably argued that the needs of this community are actually more complex and underserved than Active Duty forces. Guard Members are called upon to leave established careers or professions, financial obligations such as mortgages and other financial and personal responsibilities. This can be significantly different than for a majority of Active Duty troops who serve in a full time capacity and such demands are considered and factored into their service and family lives.

National Guard and Air Guard forces are comprised of what we have colloquially referred to as "citizen soldiers". If we look beyond the phrasing and examine just who these troops are, they are us. These troops are members of our Legislature. These troops are our staff and other public servants. They are police officers and small business owners; they are our children's school teachers and our auto mechanics, our bus drivers and realtors. These are our children and our parents.

The effect of military service, by definition is difficult and challenging. The compounding effect of multiple deployments, multiple family separations, multiple extended absences from the workplace, missing significant milestones within our families and communities are all carried by this very, very small percentage of our population.

As a result of so many of these factors, we are experiencing crises that are complicated, difficult and expensive to address.

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High on the list of underserved and unmet needs are the myriad mental health and substance misuse challenges.

Opioids, alcohol, mental health, homelessness, incarceration, broken families and the effects of a post 9/11 generation now coming of age that have carried the awful burden of growing up with an absentee military involved parent or loved one often serving remotely or in harm's way.

This problem has in fact been recognized well beyond our state as being significant and in need of being addressed at a higher level than we have had the ability to date.

Suffolk County was selected by Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) to participate in the Department of Defense/Department of Veterans Affairs Mayors Challenge to End Suicide among Military, Veterans and their Families (SMVF). This was not the result of an application but rather a selection based on need and population.

Suffolk County being the only locality in New York State selected, I proudly serve as Team Leader for this effort.

Charged with identifying and developing "emerging, best and evidence based practices" within the scope of the Program, we have made progress working with the outstanding SAMSHA Technical Assistance Team as well as the other 22 participating localities from across the United States.

This effort is an example of the supports and opportunities necessary to effectively accomplish the objective of best serving these populations.

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Coupled with the non-clinical, confidential and very effective Dwyer Program, SMVF holds much promise. The outcomes of the program however are, in most cases, several years away from implementation...we must act immediately, not later.

As leaders in both state and national veterans services, Suffolk County is proud to be proactively identifying and addressing the needs of this community, but we cannot not do the job at hand without your support.

Public awareness and education, staff and advocate training, establishment of additional, complimentary programs and of course, funding, must be made available if we are to effectively confront this urgent issue, this crisis.

The inclusion of Veteran specific representation on Mental Health, Opioid and other substance abuse, Alcohol, Housing and other appropriate Statewide Task Forces and Commissions would provide tremendous benefits to both the veteran's community as well as the community at large. As subject matter experts on this specific set of communities, it would be a humanitarian, programmatic, social and economic benefit to the communities we serve.

It will certainly and fairly be asked "where is VA on this". VA is an indispensable partner in this work. VA has capabilities that we simply do not have and we encourage all veterans to enroll with VA

That said, VA too has its limitations. In fact, VA only serves approximately 33% of America's veterans. For many reasons, not all veterans engage VA. Some for reasons of eligibility, some for concern

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that accessing VA for mental health or substance use problems will result in reporting to their National Guard, Air Guard or their civilian employer. This holds especially true for individuals who serve as law enforcement, hold security clearances, own firearms or work for defense or other related industries.

Arguably these are the very people who we hope would embrace the availability of services of VA. While VA certainly maintains a high standard for privacy and maintaining HIPPA compliance, these barriers, real or perceived persist. As a result many veterans do not access VA.

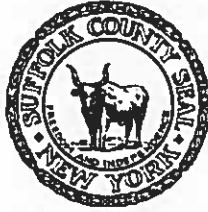
These veterans, and Guardsmen and Guardswomen turn to Dwyer is very significant numbers.

Dwyer has emerged (an evidence based Program with ongoing evaluative research studies conducted by SUNY Albany School of Social Welfare since inception of Dwyer Program). Complementing our capability to meet this growing need will be emerging and future SAMSHA SMVF outcomes. But again, these are not presently fully deployable in the community.

It should be noted that while agencies such as the Suffolk County Veterans Service Agency is well supported by a committed County Executive (who is himself a US Army veteran), our resources are understandably limited.

County agencies receive no funding support from VA yet 66% of veterans are not VA engaged. Barriers present within VA (again, real or perceived) limit many veterans from seeking their services. Counties bear an extraordinary responsibility within our communities. The New York State Division of Veterans Services is another important and

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trusted resource for us but there are distinctions between the missions of these offices and the ultimate responsibility to our veterans, Active Duty, National Guard, Reserves, their families, dependents and survivors rests largely with us at the County level.

I encourage you to solicit input AND advice from us at the County level. We are uniquely positioned to best understand the issues and the needs. We are well trained and are in most cases (Suffolk County is 100% VA Accredited) Accredited by the US Department of Veterans Affairs to lawfully represent veterans before VA as their legal advocates.

I would welcome the opportunity to meet and discuss at greater length these and other issues relating to our New York State and American heroes, the men and women who wear or have worn the flag of this great nation of their sleeve.