

Veterans Committee Minutes
February 1, 2021 – 3:00 p.m.

Present: Chairman Richardson; Committee Members Preston Allen, Ed Kinowski, Jack Lawler, Dan Pemrick, Mo Wright, Benny Zlotnick; Supervisors Tara Gaston and Matthew Veitch; Steve Bulger, Matt Rose, Audra Hedden, County Administrator; Hugh Burke, County Attorney; Jason Kemper, Planning; Frank McClement, Veterans; Michael Prezioso, Mental Health & Addiction.

Chairman Richardson called the meeting to order and welcomed all in attendance.

On a motion made by Mr. Pemrick, seconded by Mr. Zlotnick, the minutes of the December 7, 2020 meeting were approved unanimously.

Mr. Richardson announced the appointment of Mr. Zlotnick as committee vice Chair.

Mr. McClement referred to the Veterans Office Annual Report and gave a brief overview. The report is attached to these minutes. Items Mr. McClement highlighted were that Saratoga County is home to just over 17K veterans. On Appendix B of the report are the VA expenditures for Saratoga County. This speaks to the work done in connecting veterans and families to their benefits, and this has a significant financial impact to Saratoga County. In 2019, the Department of Veterans Affairs spent over \$96 million on Veterans benefits and services in the county. Just under \$48 million is direct cash payments to Veterans, for their dependents. These are monies used to pay rent and bills and care for their families. Education and Voc. rehab and employment resources are the GI Bill benefits the vocational rehabilitation benefits for service disabled veterans, and Employment Assistance or resources. The insurance and indemnities primarily speaks to VA life insurance payouts and things of that nature. \$38 million in medical care to our Veterans is primarily focused and spent by the VA hospitals and the clinics.

The peer program continued to be successful throughout the year, although it was something that was really affected by the pandemic. The program coordinator, Amy Hughes, worked very hard to maintain contact with all of the participating veterans, and then most importantly, keep them connected to each other.

The balance on hand in the trust fund is just over \$95K. The Honor Deceased Veterans Ceremony was held in January 2020. The February 2020 ceremony was cancelled due to a snowstorm and from March 2020 the program has been on hold due to the pandemic.

Mr. Richardson said that the Honor the Deceased Veterans Ceremony is currently cancelled through April of this year and he would like to extend this to June. Hopefully by June there will be a lot of people vaccinated and able to attend. If that does not work out, perhaps the ceremony could be moved outside using a tent. Mr. Zlotnick agreed that moving outside would be good and suggested perhaps using one of the pavilions at the Fairground. That way we would not have to rent a tent, set it up, additionally there is plenty parking and easy for people to get on and off the grounds. Mr. Richardson agreed.

Mr. McClement said that the way the State Budget runs, we budgeted for \$96,500 for peer funding. This program is funded by the NYS Senate PFC Joseph Dwyer Peer Mentoring Program. This program was created several years ago when Roy McDonald was the Senator of the 43rd Senate

district, and he chaired the Mental Health Committee on at the Senate. Saratoga County was one of four original pilot counties, and we received funding every single year since. It was approved last year but none of the counties in the State have received this allocation from New York State. Most recently, the Office of Mental Health notified the County Office of Mental Health that the allocation was not there. While it was budgeted to receive the money that was approved, we have not received it and do not know the status. Supervisor Richardson and Mr. McClement have been reaching out to our State representatives to try to get answers as to whether or not this funding can be expected. Mr. McClement said that we are in a tight spot as we stand today.

Mr. Richardson said that from what he understands we have enough money for about two more months to pay for this program. Mr. Richardson said that he would like everybody to take this in consideration. He would like to have a resolution at the next meeting in March and onto the full Board stating that we would like the County to fund this program on a monthly basis until we get the funds from the Peer program from the State. Senator Dr. Jordan is working on it, and Mr. Richardson has had conversations with Assemblywoman Carrie Woerner, and both of them are telling us that they are hoping they are going to get that out sometime in the near future. Mr. Richardson said that it is an excellent program, our Veterans need it. Once we get the money from the state, we would refund the County back whatever we use, and then we would have the balance leftover to get us through the rest of the year until the next funding process. Mr. Lawler agreed with the idea and said that this is a very critical time, with so much happening in the economy and with the pandemic, that we really need to make sure this service continues. Mr. Zlotnick confirmed with Mr. McClement that they will be able to continue moving forward until the Board action in March. Mr. McClement said that Dr. Prezioso is in attendance today and can answer any questions. The program at the root, is a mental health program, and the budget is through Dr. Prezioso's office, even though the program lives in the Veterans agency.

Mr. Richardson said that Amy Hughes does a great job with this particular program, and she's greatly involved in and does a lot of good work.

Dr. Prezioso said that the connection among veterans that this has afforded, the program has been terrific in terms of people keeping people close to each other, which is the biggest buffer against everything from addictions related behavior to increased depression, anxiety, substance abuse kinds of issues, alcoholism, and certainly suicide. He would welcome any additional support that they can get, because it really makes a difference in human terms for the quality of life and overall level of functioning for veterans.

Mr. Zlotnick asked Dr. Prezioso if he has seen any increase or uptick in the use of his Departments service, and if is there something that can be done as a group to help him out with them? Dr. Prezioso said that they are seeing a bit of an uptick, although it's a little bit hard to gauge, because they have gone to doing a lot of telehealth. Dr. Prezioso said that we have folks that we are continuing to serve, but not serving on site. Some numbers have gone down, some numbers have actually gone up. The addictions issues has been a very big one. That incorporates what's going on with veterans, the most current data that he has compares 2020 with 2019, and that was very close to a 100% increase in fatal overdoses. That is not specific to veterans, that is across the board in Saratoga County. This is a significant concern. Dr. Prezioso said that he was a little surprised that the number of suicides across the county has actually decreased. They are taking a look at the

impact of the Suicide Prevention Coalition to see if that has some positive effects there. But certainly in terms of addiction and that touches so many other aspects of functioning, whether it's employment, relationship status, even impacting criminal justice. Every little bit of help would be welcome.

On a motion by Mr. Allen, seconded by Mr. Zlotnick, the meeting was adjourned unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Therese Connolly
Deputy Clerk of the Board