

NEWS from Congressman Steve Israel



News Release 112-008
For Immediate Release
February 7, 2011

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News Release

Suffolk County Administrative Judge Patrick Leis, US Rep. Steve Israel Announce New Suffolk County Vets Court

Veterans courts provide special training for court personnel and an on-site resource coordinator to help advise veterans

Islip NY— Monday, Suffolk County's Administrative Judge H. Patrick Leis III and Congressman Steve Israel (D-Huntington) joined veterans and veterans' advocates to announce a Suffolk County Veterans Court. Congressman Israel called on the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to work to replicate the model around the country.

QUOTE from Judge Leis

Rep. Israel said, "Our veterans sacrifice in the service of our nation, and too often that means experiencing the horrors of war. Sadly, some return home and struggle with things like PTSD or substance abuse, sometimes leading to trouble with the law. Veterans courts are a way to give those who served us the chance to get better. We should provide our veterans with on-site resources so that we aren't simply punishing them for a crime, but also directing them to the specialized services of the VA. I'm proud to have worked with Suffolk County Administrative Judge Patrick Lies and the Northport VAMC to bring veterans court to Suffolk County."

Eric Bruno, LMSW, who is Northport's Veterans Justice Outreach Coordinator, said, "Since treatment has proven successful in reducing veterans' contacts with the legal system and potential homelessness, we at Northport VA are pleased to be partnering with the Suffolk County Second District Court and Congressman Israel to provide viable alternatives to incarceration."

Many veterans returning home from combat find it challenging to assimilate back into civilian life. Nearly a quarter of New York veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from symptoms of PTSD or major depression. Additionally, New York veterans face a 13% unemployment rate which is significantly higher than the 8.2% rate for New York civilians.

The combination of stressors often results in these veterans facing readjustment challenges. This readjustment can be marked by dysfunction (e.g. substance abuse) and contact with the justice system. Often untreated mentally ill veterans are arrested for minor criminal acts that are manifestations of their illness. The current system of conviction and sentencing leaves underlying problems unresolved and enables a pattern of re-offending. It can lead to prolonged suffering as well as other problems like homelessness.

To deal with these issues Judge Lies and Congressman Israel gathered a group of interested parties to discuss forming a veterans court. The first meeting was held June 25, 2010 at the Suffolk County Administrative Judge's Office in Central Islip, with Congressman Israel, Judge Patrick Leis, Judge Toomey, Judge Fitzgibbon, Joe Sledge, Public Affairs/ Northport VAMC, Greg Curran, Homeless Veterans Coordinator/Northport VAMC, John Sperando, Social Work Services/Northport VAMC, Eric Bruno, HUD VASH Program/Northport VAMC and others. Over the last several months of 2010 details were hashed out on how a veterans' court could be implemented in Suffolk County. Specifically what veterans would be able to utilize the court (non-violent offenders, DWT's, etc.), what judges had an interest in participating and where funding would come from for this program.

In conjunction with the Northport VA, the Veterans Court, the judge and staff will have specialized training and specific understanding of resources available to veterans provided at the VA. The VA will also assign a Court Liaison, called a "Resource Coordinator," to act as an advisor to the court. The DA will screen cases to determine whether they can be heard in the Vets Court. Certain offenses will not be seen, and they include sex offences, violent crimes, and all felonies.

Last month, Congressman Israel sent a letter to Veterans Administration Secretary Eric Shinseki asking him to look at Veterans Courts like the one being set up in Suffolk County as a model for the rest of the country and to have the VA work with local court systems in the way that the Northport VA has worked closely with the Suffolk county to set up this court system.

President Obama has announced a coordinated and comprehensive Federal Government level approach to supporting military families. The Veterans Court concept is part of the initiative and will be expanded to other states across the US. The DOJ, HHS, and VA have partnered to further develop the Veterans Treatment Court concept. A Veterans Drug Court Planning Initiative will be held in 2011 to train 10 teams from various cities on how to coordinate services for veterans suffering from substance abuse.

The first Veterans Court was established in Buffalo, New York in 2008. Buffalo's Veterans Court cites a zero recidivism rate (i.e. none of the participants have been rearrested and returned). Judge Toomey has identified approximately 100 potential veterans' cases for Veterans Court, which are being screened by the DA.

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