
Committee Meeting

ASSEMBLY MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

*“The Committee will receive testimony from invited guests
to discuss issues concerning veterans with catastrophic injuries and disabilities”*

LOCATION: Meeting via Zoom

DATE: February 16, 2022
10:00 a.m.

MEMBERS OF COMMITTEE PRESENT:

Assemblywoman Cleopatra G. Tucker, Chair
Assemblyman Wayne P. DeAngelo, Vice Chair
Assemblyman Herb Conaway, Jr.
Assemblyman Ronald S. Dancer
Assemblywoman DiAnne C. Gove



ALSO PRESENT:

Tracey F. Pino Murphy
*Office of Legislative Services
Committee Aide*

Sherwood T. Goodenough
*Assembly Majority
Committee Aide*

Kevin Logan
Thea Sheridan
*Assembly Republican
Committee Aides*

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***Hearing Recorded and Transcribed by
The Office of Legislative Services, Public Information Office,
Hearing Unit, State House Annex, PO 068, Trenton, New Jersey***

Cleopatra G. Tucker
Chair

Wayne P. DeAngelo
Vice Chair

Herb Conaway
Ronald S. Dancer
DiAnne C. Gove



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NEW JERSEY STATE LEGISLATURE

ASSEMBLY MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

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COMMITTEE NOTICE

TO: MEMBERS OF THE ASSEMBLY MILITARY AND VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

FROM: ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLEOPATRA G. TUCKER, CHAIRWOMAN

SUBJECT: **COMMITTEE MEETING - FEBRUARY 16, 2022**

The public may address comments and questions to Tracey F. Pino Murphy, Committee Aide, or make bill status and scheduling inquiries to Natalie Pagan, Secretary, at (609)847-3890, fax (609)777-2998, or e-mail: OLSAideAMV@njleg.org. Written and electronic comments, questions and testimony submitted to the committee by the public, as well as recordings and transcripts, if any, of oral testimony, are government records and will be available to the public upon request.

The Assembly Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee will meet remotely on Wednesday, February 16, 2022 at 10:00 AM.

The committee will receive testimony from invited guests to discuss issues concerning veterans with catastrophic injuries and disabilities.

The public may not attend the Committee meeting in person but may view the meeting via the New Jersey Legislature home page at <https://www.njleg.state.nj.us/>.

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Issued 2/9/22

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
Senator Joseph P. Cryan Chair Senate Military and Veterans' Affairs Committee	2
Bill Graves President Blind Veterans Association of New Jersey	3
Mustafa Shabazz Vice President Blind Veterans Association of New Jersey	3
John O'Connell Veteran Blind Veterans Association of New Jersey	3
Johnnie Walker State Adjutant Disabled American Veterans Department of New Jersey	4
Lawrence Mansier President Hopewell Valley Lions Club, and Former Chair Hopewell Valley Seniors Ad Hoc Committee, and Former Chair Hopewell Valley Senior Advisory Board	4
Joseph Nyzio Administrator Catastrophic Disabled Veterans Fund, and Chief Veterans Benefits Bureau New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs	4
Flowers N. Gatlin Member Blind Veterans Association of New Jersey	20

Joseph “Doc” Crawley
Chair
Disabled American Veterans Department of New Jersey 26

Bob Andrezejczak
Executive Director
United States Department of Agriculture Farm Service Agency, and
Former Assemblyman/Senator 27

Assemblyman Brian Bergen
General Assembly District 25, and
Vice Commander
American Legion Morris County, and
Vice Commander
Veterans of Foreign Wars 34

mej: 1-37

ASSEMBLYWOMAN CLEOPATRA G. TUCKER (Chair): Why don't we get started; we're going to have the Pledge of Allegiance. And *then* after the Pledge, we can come back and *then* everybody can introduce themselves and what organizations they belong to, okay?

So let's have the Pledge.

(All recite the Pledge Allegiance)

MS. PINO MURPHY: As a friendly reminder to all participants, guests, and Committee members, the Zoom meeting will be videotaped and everything you say and do will be recorded unless you mute yourself or alter your video.

Thank you.

Chairwoman Tucker, if I may, may I take attendance?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Yes, please.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Assemblywoman Gove.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN GOVE: Here.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Assemblyman Dancer.

ASSEMBLYMAN DANCER: Here.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Assemblyman Conaway is on his way.

Vice-Chairman DeAngelo.

ASSEMBLYMAN WAYNE P. DeANGELO (Vice-Chair):

Here.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Chairwoman Tucker. (no response)

I see you.

We have a quorum.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Okay.

At this point, we are going to have Senator Joe Cryan introduce himself, because he is the Chair of the Senate Committee of Military and Veterans' Affairs.

SENATOR JOSEPH P. CRYAN: Chairlady Tucker, thank you and the members of the Committee for allowing me to join in today; I appreciate your kind invitation.

I am looking forward very much to being a partner with you, as we move forward on these important issues to these heroes who served our country, and the things we can do together and make sure that we make lives better for each and every one of them.

I appreciate your interest and your courtesy here, and I am looking forward to the conversation.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: You're welcome.

And I think the whole Committee is looking forward to this Hearing we have today, because it is a very vital Committee hearing. I don't think we've had a Committee hearing that dealt with our disabled veterans.

So this hearing is very important for us, because we need -- as legislators, we need to know exactly what the issues are and how we can best address their concerns and everything.

So at this point, we are going to have the-- Tracey has a list of the participants, so if we can get started-- Or you can introduce yourself so everybody will know who you are.

We can start at the top of the screen.

BILL GRAVES: My name-- (technical difficulties)

MS. PINO MURPHY: Mr. Graves, I'm not sure if you had started speaking, but then you were muted.

UNIDENTIFIED SPEAKER: Star six on the phone.

MR. GRAVES: Okay, I am unmuted now, correct?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Correct.

MR. GRAVES: I don't know who muted me.

My name is Bill Graves, I am a blind vet, and I am President of the Blind Vet Association for the State of New Jersey.

And I am very glad that the Committee got together. And for the rest of us vets who are on here and the ones who can't get in, we will try to explain to you what is and is not going on in the State of New Jersey to help the veterans.

Thank you.

M U S T A F A S H A B A Z Z: Yes, my name is Mustafa Shabazz. I am a blind vet; also the Vice President of the Blind Veterans Association of New Jersey.

I thank the Committee, and I am hoping that we can find some resolutions to this dreadful problem that we're experiencing.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYMAN DANCER: John, are you going to say something?

J O H N O ' C O N N E L L: Hi, yes.

Good morning, this is John O'Connell. I am also a blind veteran with the Blind Veterans Association. And I am honored to be here, and thank you for giving us an opportunity to speak this morning.

Thank you.

JOHNNIE WALKER: I'm Johnnie Walker, I'm the State Adjutant for the Disabled American Veterans of the State of New Jersey, and I am also waiting for our Chairman of the Benefit Protection Team, which is our legislative committee, to enter the meeting. I haven't seen him enter yet; he is supposed to testify today.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Mr. Mansier, you're next.

LAWRENCE MANSIER: Okay; can you all hear me?

MS. PINO MURPHY: Yes.

MR. MANSIER: Okay.

I am loosely associated with a lot of different organizations. Basically, I am a Korean vet, paralyzed with polio in the Korea venture; American Legion; I also founded several senior organizations, and still am working on that.

I am very interested in what's going on.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Mr. Nyzio, you're next.

JOSEPH NYZIO: Hi, good morning everybody.

My name is Joe Nyzio, I am the Chief of the Veterans Benefits Bureau at the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs. I oversee the New Jersey Catastrophic Entitlement Program.

I am also a disabled veteran myself, and I am also blind in my left eye.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Chairwoman Tucker, those are the only invited guests we have at this time. Everyone else on the call are Committee members or staff.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Okay.

All right, so we can get started with the testimonies from the people that are here.

MS. PINO MURPHY: On my list I have -- the next person to speak would be Mr. Lawrence Mansier, recipient of the Catastrophic Disabled Veteran Fund. I don't know if he wanted to move forward in speaking, or--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Well, we can just move forward.

MR. MANSIER: Yes, please.

MS. PINO MURPHY: You can go ahead, Mr. Mansier.

MR. MANSIER: I really don't know what you want me to say, to tell you the truth.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Okay. I had you on my list as a speaker, that's all.

Next we have Mr. Joseph Nyzio, Chief of the Department of Veterans Benefits Bureau, a part of Military and Veterans Affairs, and Administrator of the Catastrophic Disabled Veterans Fund.

MR. NYZIO: Right; I think that was the order, I was supposed to speak first about -- just give a brief overview of the Catastrophic Entitlement Program in New Jersey. You guys also asked me to find a Catastrophic Entitlement recipient. That's Mr. Mansier; we asked him and he was able to come on the call this morning.

So I'm just going to give a quick breakdown of the numbers, how much they're paid, the application process of the New Jersey Catastrophic Program for New Jersey.

With any program that New Jersey has, there is an application form that each veteran or surviving spouse has to fill out. Once we receive a completed application, we evaluate the application for completeness, make sure all the information was submitted so we can verify the application. Once the application is verified, whether the veteran or the surviving spouse, we add them to our rolls for the Catastrophic Entitlement Program.

There are certain eligibility requirements to qualify for the New Jersey Catastrophic Program, and I'm just going to give a quick breakdown of what the eligibility requirements are. You must be a New Jersey resident with 100 percent permanent and total service-connected disability from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. They need to submit their DD-214; sometimes proof of residency is asked; you know, we need to see a driver's license or voter's registration card, a utility bill, and other similar documentation to prove that they are, in fact, New Jersey residents.

In the Catastrophic Entitlement Program, the veteran -- or the surviving spouse -- must fall under one of seven catastrophic disabilities, which I'll just give the seven breakdown: It is loss of sight; amputation of both hands, both feet, or one hand and one foot; hemiplegia and permanent paralysis of one leg and one arm on either side of the body; paraplegia and permanent paralysis of both legs and lower parts of the body; osteochondritis and permanent loss of use of both legs; multiple sclerosis and the loss of use of both feet or both legs; and quadriplegia.

As you can see, these veterans, these are catastrophic disabilities -- illnesses -- that these veterans have, and as of today their monthly entitlement is \$62.50, which equates to \$750 yearly.

I pulled a list of all the veterans that are receiving the Catastrophic Entitlement throughout the State of New Jersey, and as of the query I ran yesterday the total number of recipients in New Jersey is 180; 87 of those are spouses -- surviving spouses. And I can break down the total number of amputee recipients, it is 36; the total number of blind recipients is 26; paraplegic, 43; hemiplegic, 13; osteochondritis, 5; quadriplegic, 6; multiple sclerosis, 50. We have also four veterans who are receiving two Catastrophic benefits because they have two of the Catastrophic disabilities, and there's only four in New Jersey.

So that's a quick breakdown of the Catastrophic Program. I invited Larry Mansier, he was going to speak first, just to-- He's one of our recipients of the Catastrophic Program, and I guess you guys wanted a testimony or a statement from him about the Program and what challenges a Catastrophic recipient faces here in New Jersey, is that correct?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Yes.

MR. NYZIO: And what we could do better, right, as a State?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Yes.

MR. NYZIO: Right.

So I mean, Larry, if you have anything you would like to add, the floor is yours.

MR. MANSIER: I don't know exactly what area you want to go into. If we're talking about ability to move in and out of buildings and off sidewalks and various things like that, that's vastly improved, but not the greatest thing in the world.

No, I'm very fortunate to have a wife who helps out, and I try to help out myself. At 91, I have polio, and polio syndromes are gradually

catching up with me. So it's-- But I'm still totally involved, a wonderful thing like this helps out that.

I think things are getting better. Could they be better? I'd have to think a little bit more about that. Frankly, transportation is always a problem. I no longer drive, and that's a big deal. I think one of the things -- when you get older and you can't do these things, you get isolated. And thankfully we've got this and the phone, and I've got various meetings I organize and run.

So as long as I can keep occupied and doing something worthwhile, I think that's it.

I will answer any questions frankly.

MR. NYZIO: I think we'll go through the meeting and, again, if anybody has any questions for me or for Larry at the end of the meeting, we're more than willing to answer any questions that we can.

So thank you Larry, thank you for being here today. Please stay on the meeting.

MR. MANSIER: Okay.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Okay, Tracey, we can go to the next speaker.

MS. PINO MURPHY: I don't have any titles on here. Do we have a representative of the BA -- the Army Zoom? (no response)

It doesn't appear so.

The next person I have is Mr. Graves.

MR. GRAVES: Good morning.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Good morning.

MR. GRAVES: Good morning; thank you all very much for allowing us to be here today. This is something we have been trying to get for many a year.

And as the gentleman just stated, one of our main problems here in New Jersey is transportation. We have Veterans who cannot get to the hospital to get treatment. We have veterans who get to the hospital, and then can't get home. We had a vet two days ago, who lives in Newark, who was dropped off by Access Link, and two hours later he was still standing in front of the East Orange VA hospital trying to get home.

I had a meeting with the Director of Transportation a month-and-a-half ago pertaining to this, and I told him that we were trying to get a meeting with your group because we have ideas on how this transportation could be solved; but no one wants to sit down. We have a program in the Lion's hospital facility that helps blind vets maneuver at home, in the streets, and so forth -- but it's no good, because vets can't get there.

We have a young lady who lives five minutes from the hospital and she's only able to get transportation to the hospital once a week, and then they have to be picked up by 11:00 or 12:00. So people can't even get to have their eyes checked, tests, or taken care of. This is a major, major problem and we would love to sit down with the proper people to give them our ideas.

Thirdly, Access Link is a good transportation, but it's run by New Jersey Transit. Now, my conception of New Jersey Transit is meaning that this is a company that takes care of New Jersey; not New Hope and New Berlin. There are some parts of New Jersey where Access Link does not go. They say they don't go because the buses don't go, but New Jersey Transit

also has trains that run up and down and across New Jersey in parts where buses don't go. So where the trains can go, a car can go. And we feel that a law or something should be passed that, across the entire State of New Jersey, Access Link should be able to pick up and drop off veterans and disabled people.

And if they don't have a program, a group of us got together and worked out a program which we would like to bring to you all in detail. And we would be more than glad to get to Trenton by any means necessary to show you all this program and to lay it out for you.

Now, I know Joe is going to talk, because he's from South Jersey where there are more veterans than anywhere in the state, and he will tell you, more in-depth, what they go through.

If there's no questions, I guess Joe will talk.

MR. O'CONNELL: Hi, this is John O'Connell; Bill, thank you. Bill asked me to come on here and talk about veterans' transportation.

So up until the point where I lost my sight, which is actually service-connected, I was like everybody else in New Jersey. I would get in my car and I would go, there were no issues. You have independence and you go. Unfortunately, late in life I lost my sight and I lost my job because of that -- I was required to have a certain level of vision to do my job.

I actually thought that this was my problem, that I was the only guy going through this transportation issue. I live in the State of New Jersey, which is -- I believe it's the most populated state in the union, yet if I was a veteran in the middle of Montana or Kansas, I would actually have an easier -- it would be easier for me to get to VA medical appointments, because they

have a program called The Rural Transportation Grant. It's not available to me here in New Jersey.

I also-- When you peel the onion back, I live in Ocean County. Bill stated -- I didn't know any of this until you start researching this stuff. I live in-- There are the most veterans in the State of New Jersey that are located in Ocean County. I also live in a town, if you go online, it has the most veteran population out of any town, including Newark -- a city -- in New Jersey, and that's Toms River. But yet, for me to get a ride to a VA medical appointment, which is usually 15 minutes away, which usually one of my family members takes me to -- it's unbelievable.

My wife became ill and she wasn't able to drive me. And it was so frustrating, because when you go online there are lots of options for me to get to the VA medical appointment. The problem is, what is being advertised online and what is actually available are two different things, you know. If we were to end this call and you were to research it, you would say, "Oh that guy is crazy, John is crazy, he has all these options available to him." Problem is, when you start making a call everybody -- they're very nice, everyone is very nice, but they tell you they'd love to help you but they can't. They tell you how they don't have the money. They tell you how they don't have the drivers. They give you all these reasons.

My experiences are pre-COVID, because the VA pretty much shut down all in-person medical visits, so I'm just getting back to that right now. And here is one of my frustrations. Ocean Ride is very good in Ocean County, the people are very nice; I've had some great success with Ocean Ride. The problem is, is if I have to get somewhere using Ocean Ride, I better make that appointment four weeks prior, because I get no priority as a blind

vet. Their standby service is -- you can't do standby. I can't make a medical appointment and then, the morning of, wait for a phone call to see if I kind of won the lottery to get a ride, and that's what their standby is.

The problem is, going north to Lions or East Orange, you have very, very limited -- very limited -- options because you are given one specific day during the week and you have to get there -- normally you get there by 9:00 a.m., they have to leave by noon. So you already have limited opportunities for appointments, and now you have like a two-hour window on one day of the week to go somewhere.

I had worked the problem out with the VA prior to COVID. They have all sorts of programs, they had a special mode of transportation which I qualified for. But for some reason, now in the post-COVID world, I guess all that continuity was lost, and now I have to go jump through hoops to a program that I am qualified for; which basically, what we came up with prior to COVID with the transportation folks at the VA was I don't need an ambulance, I don't need an ambulette, I can get around; I just need a ride. That's all I need. And they basically said, "Fine, just call an Uber to go to the Brick clinic." And it was working great.

I maybe go once a month, and if you average it out over a year, it's probably less than that. It's about \$25 one way, which is-- They wanted to send an ambulance to pick me up. I know my neighbors would have freaked out. "What happened to John?" I don't know what that would have cost -- \$500, \$600, \$700 for an ambulance? I didn't need an ambulance, I was just going for a regular appointment.

We worked it out, and now I'm having to re-invent the wheel in the post-COVID world, and for whatever reason, all the people I worked with are no longer there. Because we came to a solution.

I think what you need to watch out for, as I wrap this up-- I'm kind of-- There's a lot -- I said there was a lot out there online. There's a lot of volunteer organizations. Wow, you know, volunteer organizations, they're great -- but they're volunteers, they're not paid. Every one of the volunteer organizations that I called looking for a ride, "We'll get back to you, we'll get back to you." None of them ever got back to me. I'd still be waiting for that ride today. When you're dealing with volunteers, you're dealing with people who aren't paid, so you're at the whim, you know. And those programs, for whatever reason -- I think they work really well in other parts of the country, but they don't work well here.

I think the transportation issue isn't a blind veteran problem -- obviously the gentleman, I believe it was Larry, the first veteran -- he's not blind, but he mentioned transportation due to some other health issues. I think it's-- Someone who doesn't have access to a car and can't drive, it's a big issue. It's a big issue, and I think, moving forward, our President Bill Graves said he has a plan. All this is out there, the blueprint is out there. I'm just looking for people to deliver on what they say they are going to do.

When you talk to the VA, they actually say -- I think the VISOR Program, at Lions, is excellent, their low-vision program? I have nothing but great things to say about it. Unfortunately, it's out in the middle of nowhere and you don't provide anybody a way to get there. And that's crazy to me; that's crazy. And it's not-- It's a very easy problem to solve, yet they say

they've been working on it for seven years. Think about that -- *seven years*. Seven years? Unacceptable. It's a simple problem.

I think of the American with Disabilities Act -- I don't have any verbatim wording in there -- but I think if you go to that, it talks about accommodations, it talks a lot about waivers. I think it would be very simple to just put a bus line, any bus line -- look at whatever is the closest and say, from now on, we're going to go in this direction for seven, eight, nine miles, and we're going to stop at Lions. And once you stop there, you open up paratransit. But it's not the silver bullet.

I opened this by saying at first I literally thought I was the only guy having this problem. It was so frustrating, I thought it was my problem until I joined the Blind Veterans Organization, I met Bill Graves, and they didn't have a meeting on transportation -- they just had a meeting, people getting together and talking. And all of a sudden this topic about transportation came up, and I thought it was a South Jersey issue; and it turned out that everyone in the state who was on that call couldn't get to their medical appointments. I was shocked. One, I was relieved -- I felt nobody had a bullseye on my back anymore and they were just out to get me.

But it was also very sad, and I think it's not, I don't think it's-- You know, we're talking about veterans here because it's the Veterans' Committee, but knowing other folks in the blind community, I will tell you this: The blind community, the visual-impaired community, number one issue -- number one issue is transportation. They just can't get around. You know, where do I move if, in the State of New Jersey, the most populated state in the union, I can't get around? Where do I go from here? You should be able to get around. I'm not asking for rides to go to social events or

anything like that, I'm asking to be provided transportation that everyone says they can do online. I'm just asking for people to do what they say they're supposed to do.

I appreciate the time, I appreciate my ability to be heard; and that I'm grateful for.

Thank you.

MR. WALKER: I have a question for Mr. O'Connell.

MR. O'CONNELL: Yes.

MR. WALKER: Mr. O'Connell, Johnnie Walker; I'm the State Adjutant with the Disabled American Veterans.

Have you ever reached out to the DAV for a ride?

MR. O'CONNELL: Yes, several times, Johnnie.

I was very tactful by not saying any names of any volunteer organizations on the call. I don't like pointing fingers, because when you point fingers there's always three that point right back to you. But I reached out to both Toms River and Brick. "Yeah, we'll get back to you, we'll get back to you."

MR. WALKER: And I understand that, sir. I'm not saying we're perfect; there are issues. But the only transportation we have in the state-- And to back up your problem -- transportation is the most serious; and I'll give you a little, and maybe the Chairwoman, a little education.

We run three vans out of Cape May County, and most of our people go to Philadelphia and Wilmington. And when we take a patient out in the morning, they leave at 6:00, between 5:30 and 6:30 in the morning, and we'll take six people to Philadelphia and drop three off in Philadelphia, go to their appointments; then take the other three down to Wilmington,

where they get their chemo or radiation, wait for them to get done; and then take them back to Philadelphia to pick up the people in Philadelphia, and don't get home until 7:00 at night.

And anybody who has ever had chemo or radiation may understand they don't want to be in a van for eight, nine hours. They want to be home in bed, okay? The transportation system with the VA is in terrible, terrible condition; we know this. But the only thing we have to offer is, we have 33 chapters in the State of New Jersey and part of our mission statement is transportation. And we do have chapters that answer the call and do a great job at it; we also have six chapters that have vans, and I wanted to bring that out.

Chairman Tucker, I have to leave this meeting to go to another meeting. I'm supposed to be at a Lions officers meeting at 10:30 a.m., and I would just like permission to make a statement on behalf of the DAV, if I may, before I leave.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Sure, go ahead.

MR. WALKER: Okay.

I want everybody to understand the three largest veterans organizations in the state: The American Legion, the VFW, and the DAV, okay. The American Legion is a great organization, do wonderful things; VFW is a great organization, do wonderful things. But I want everybody to understand the DAV is what it says and what it means -- it's Disabled American Veterans. The only way you can join our organization, you have to be rated, you have to have either a purple heart or a rating in the VA administration, and you're either a wounded or injured veteran. Disabled American Veterans.

I've been the State Adjutant for six years, and I got invited to this meeting -- and I'm not throwing anybody under the bus -- I got invited to this meeting yesterday afternoon around 1:15 p.m. They asked me to come to this meeting and testify and speak. I want, somehow or another, some sort of connection and communication with your Committee, Chairwoman Tucker. We take our job seriously, and our main mission statement is to get every veteran in the state, every veteran in the country, into the VA medical system to get them what they are entitled to. And we can't do that without the help of our legislators, because we've got to have the right laws on the books. It's urgent and very important to us.

I have the Chairman of our Benefit Protection Team, which is our legislative committee, who is going to make a statement later when you call on him. But I need to have cooperation, Chairman Tucker, with your Committee; and I want to be in some way informed, in some way that has communication so we can work together on a lot of these issues.

I'm sorry that I sound distraught, but I am, and I hope we can resolve this issue.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Thank you for your comments.

And sure, we're going to resolve these issues. And we're going to make sure that you stay in contact with our Committee about our disabled veterans, and what you plan to do, and who will be a part of our working Committee to make sure that we can carry out some of these issues and complaints that you all have.

So from now on, you will be notified accordingly, and I'm sorry about the lateness of the notification yesterday.

MR. WALKER: Thank you very much, and we appreciate the opportunity.

MS. PINO MURPHY: For the record, Chairwoman Tucker, Assemblyman Conaway has joined the Zoom meeting, and we also have Assemblyman Bergen joined. Just to let you know.

The next person we have-- I'm sorry, go ahead.

MR. GRAVES: May I ask-- This is Bill Graves again.

I would like to say that one of the gentlemen who was going to speak could not get on. A lot of us had problems today. But this was Mr. Elias Matos. He had a heart problem, and most of the heart problems are taken care of in New York. They made an appointment for him to go to 23rd Street. He was supposed to have transportation; two days prior he had no transportation.

I went ballistic trying to do everything I knew to get him over there. Fortunately enough, he was able to take a medication, delaying his operation for a week before they got him over there.

As you will hear from everybody, it's an easy situation if the proper people will sit down and listen to people who have been in this situation for years, and talk about it to get the proper transportation. And this is one of the gentlemen that would be on board, but because of an operation, he was almost not here. We can't have that.

And it's not pointing fingers at just one organization -- it's the entire state, as everyone has said. We need to have an in-person meeting with a group of people who are dedicated to doing something and not just talking about something.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Okay; thank you, Mr. Graves, for your comments.

We're going to move right along because we do have other people who want to testify.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Next on the list is Mustafa Shabazz.

MR. SHABAZZ: Okay.

Again, good morning, representatives, and thank you again for the opportunity to get online about this issue.

What I want to do is refer back to the late '90s. What happened? We had money that was attributed to the Veterans Association to provide transportation to the hospitals and the other medical centers to get the veterans in New Jersey transportation. Unfortunately, that money was taken as we came into the 20th Century. That money was taken, and then it became a problem with transportation.

We used to have agencies and also different-- The Veterans Center, the hospitals and so forth, would pay them to get transportation for veterans all over the state and deliver them. Like I said, unfortunately that money was abolished and, you know, it formulated this big problem that we're now looking at. I can't say why it was taken away, because it was greatly needed -- and it was utilized to great success.

But again, that might be something that might be able to be looked into on a national level, from the states, to look into the national veterans and see if money can be restored to the local state veterans centers to accommodate the transportation problems. That's one thing I think can be done.

So I'm hoping that we can find a solution that can provide, again, the monies available for transportation for veterans to certain important hospitals and medical appointments that they greatly need.

Again, thank you, Committee and Representative Tucker, and we hope we can continue this to resolve the issue.

Thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Thank you so much for your comment.

Can we move on?

MS. PINO MURPHY: Next on the list we have Mr. Gatlin.

F L O W E R S G A T L I N: I am a new member of the BVA, still trying to get claims for my vision impairment; I'm not totally blind yet, but just joined. And a brother asked me to join just to get some ideas, some of the challenges, that BVA is having.

So I guess I'm sitting here as a guest just learning what is happening with the organization that I just joined. I've been a member of the VISOR Program with VA for, I guess, the last five years, and they have done a tremendous job in helping me with my vision impairment. But I am now beginning to hear some of the challenges. I appreciate brother O'Connell's testimony about what happens when you finally go totally blind and you can't see in any way, relying on the VA to help you out in some manner.

So I just appreciate, really, this introduction to your organization, and look forward to talking to you some other time.

Thank you for asking me to join, and I joined late because I couldn't get on either, I had a little trouble getting on the line. But thanks, brother Graves, for inviting me to join you on this session.

MR. NYZIO: Ms. Tucker?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Yes.

MR. NYZIO: Can I say something about the transportation from the State of New Jersey and the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs?

Well, here at the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, in partnership with all 21 counties in New Jersey, there is a transportation program for veterans. Is it a perfect program? Absolutely not. And all these shortcomings, all this testimony we hear today, we've heard for years. I mean, we're limited with money, actual buses, transportation, the amount of veterans who have appointments on that particular day. The VA, the Federal VA, has been pushing to get veterans into the VA system for years now, and part of that hurts the transportation program because the more veterans that enroll in the VA system, the more transportation they need. And, you know, through the counties and DMVA and the State, you know, we probably haven't built the program up enough over these last 20 years, or however long the program has been going on, but there is an actual program.

It does have its shortfalls and issues, just like any program out there. But I just wanted to put on the record that there is a transportation program for veterans in all 21 counties in New Jersey.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Could you provide a list of all the programs in each county for us, please?

MR. NYZIO: Say that again, ma'am, you broke up.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Provide a list of all the programs, transportation programs, in each county for us.

MR. NYZIO: Will do.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Okay.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONAWAY: Madam Chair?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Yes.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONAWAY: I would ask, through you, if Mr. Nyzio could just sort of outline, give us what exactly that program is. How do people schedule themselves, avail themselves of the program; where does it go, where does it take people, does it take people out of state, is it only for in-state services that are provided in-state? Is it an online schedule; can people call up if they don't have access to an online system to schedule rides?

Can you put-- What is the transportation system in DMVA, please.

MR. NYZIO: Well, it is handled by each county. Each county runs their own program a little differently, there is no master online schedule. That's probably a good idea; it's something to look into.

How it works through DMVA: We have a series, a network of Veteran Service Officers located all throughout the state. And how it typically works -- and there's other ways to do it -- is the veteran will contact the Veterans Service Officer, and the Veterans Service Officer will coordinate in that county to schedule that veteran a ride to the VA facility that they need to go to.

But there is no -- to my knowledge, there is no universal scheduling website that each veteran can go to; it's handled on a county basis.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONAWAY: And thank you, Madam Chair. And just-- Do you have information on what the funding has been? Is it county, is it a transfer from the State to the county to run the program? How is it funded, and what has been the trendline on the funding for these county-based programs?

MR. NYZIO: Well, to my understanding, yes it is funded through the State, through DMVA to the counties. And there's a yearly agreement that the counties will provide transportation to the veterans. I will have to get back to you about the funding issue, I don't have that off the top of my head.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONAWAY: Well, if you would, I'm sure the Chair would appreciate it, and so would the members of the Committee.

Thank you.

Thank you, Madam Chair.

MR. O'CONNELL: Sir, this is John O'Connell, Blinded Veterans Association.

I'm sorry to interrupt, Assemblyman, but there is -- the VA has a better veteran transportation service that is run out of East Orange, and I think you're onto an excellent point.

There are a lot of options in the state; they're not working exactly as advertised, but I would tend to think that a central coordination-- Because just in my county alone there's several options; and instead of duplicating efforts and spending more money, maybe if somebody coordinated the efforts and maybe could reach out across county lines, if there was a shortfall, it would be a lot better.

But there is -- the VA does run a veterans transportation service. They advertise a service, Vet Ride, *www.VetRide.va.go*. It looks excellent. This is the only problem: You go online, you sign up; they service Lions, which is where our VISOR, our Visually Impaired Service Orientation Rehabilitation, is. They service that hospital, yet when you sign up, get a password, ask for a ride, there's no response.

So I think you're really onto something with coordinating efforts. And I would appreciate it if I ask for a ride, if someone can't do it, just tell me you can't do it. Don't sugarcoat it.

I appreciate it. I'm sorry, I had to interject that. I think you are onto something, but I think that something is already out there, it's just not being worked very well.

Thank you, sir.

SENATOR CRYAN: Madam Chair, if I may?

MS. PINO MURPHY: Chairwoman Tucker?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Go ahead.

SENATOR CRYAN: Thank you, Chairladies. To me, or to--

MS. PINO MURPHY: To you, Senator Cryan.

SENATOR CRYAN: Well first off, thanks again for the invitation.

I do have a question of the gentleman from DMVA as well. Has there been-- You mentioned the fact that the transportation issues have been undergoing for years. Has there been any analysis in terms of a study, any sort of proactive type of analysis of the transportation network, within the past four or five years, that the Committee -- both committees, Senate and

Assembly -- could potentially have available to them? Has there been anything like that done?

MR. NYZIO: To my knowledge, no -- or I'm not sure, let's put it that way.

We understand there is shortcomings of transportation, and I get it. I'm a disabled veteran myself. I see the vans going to the hospitals, I see the veterans standing outside, waiting. And this is nothing new, this is an issue.

And as the gentleman said before, there are a lot of programs -- it looks great on paper, but once you put pen to-- There's issues. There's a coordinated effort between the Federal VA, the State of New Jersey, the counties, the towns; and I think there's a lot of issues once you start talking between different governments, and local towns, and counties; and sharing of services and duplication of efforts. This is all, you know-- We're aware of all of this stuff. But we can do better, all across the board.

SENATOR CRYAN: Fair enough, I just was curious.

And thank you again for your comments, but I was just curious.

And, again, thank you, Madam Chair.

So whether or not there had been a forward analysis done, maybe that, to Assemblyman Conaway's point, maybe that might be part of that solution, too.

Thank you; thank you very much.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Okay, Tracey.

MS. PINO MURPHY: The next person we have is Joseph "Doc" Crawley, Disabled Vets Department of New Jersey.

JOSEPH "DOC" CRAWLEY: Good morning.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Good morning.

MR. CRAWLEY: Good morning, Madam Chairwoman, and members of the Committee.

I would like to thank you for letting the New Jersey Department of Disabled American Veterans testify before this Committee.

I am Joseph Crawley; my nickname is “Doc” because I was a Navy Corpsman serving with the Marine Corps in Vietnam, and also served with the Marine Corps in Desert Storm in 1991. I am a total and permanent disabled American veteran.

Most of you are familiar with our prior title -- legislative committee -- which fellow VSO’s still use. In my role in the DVA, I am tasked with keeping our legislators informed of our disability issues. The DVA is a service organization chartered by the U.S. Congress in 1920. New Jersey DVA was formed in 1921. The DVA has been working for disabled American veterans in receiving the benefits that they are deserved, but, more importantly, have earned.

Today, I would like to present four related topics of concern to disabled veterans in New Jersey. These topics are related to how the State of New Jersey recognizes a disabled veteran.

First, the period of conflicts identified by the Federal government are not aligned with New Jersey. The Federal government has 14 pages of conflicts that they recognize where a veteran can get disability from. New Jersey has 7 items -- not pages, but 7 items, or wars or conflicts that they recognize.

Second, the Federal government and the State of New Jersey have different definitions of who is a disabled veteran. There are veterans

who are rated total and permanently disabled by the Federal government, and cannot be or are not eligible for New Jersey benefits.

Third, the role of Reservists and National Guard have changed over the decades. I was an active duty or active Reservist. That meant that I did my two weeks every year, and training once a month, okay. My unit was activated; it was a little bit shy of 1,000 medical and ancillary people that were activated and sent to Saudi Arabia, where we operated a 500-bed field hospital. They may serve on active duty for multiple assignments and deployments, but not continuously for the 180 days. The Federal government recognizes service-connected disabilities for training purposes. New Jersey does not recognize these disabilities for receiving benefits.

Fourth, New Jersey has the best employment benefits for hiring disabled veterans through its veteran's preference. In this selection process, unfortunately, it is only applied to civil service tests. Today, many enlisted personnel have bachelor and even master's degrees. Many positions in the State are exempt from these preferences. This includes agencies and educational institutions. If a disabled veteran meets the requirements of the job posting, why shouldn't he or her have the same hiring preference as the lower salary positions?

This concludes my remarks today. Thank you for your time to present the major issues for the disabled American veterans.

MS. PINO MURPHY: The next speaker we have is Bob Andrezejczak, Executive Director for the USDA Farm Service Agency, former State Senator and Assemblyman, Army Sergeant injured in the line of duty.

B O B A N D R E Z E J C Z A K: Good morning, everyone.

Madam Chair, thank you for having me on today. I appreciate the time.

I also want to thank our previous speakers for bringing up some very valid issues that we are facing as veterans here in New Jersey every day.

I want to go back to transportation for a minute. Transportation for veterans has been an issue for a very long time. This was something that we tackled when I was in the Legislature, and something that I felt we had corrected at that time. Speaking with DMVA, we've met with them and they urged us not to pursue the issue, but it's something that our veterans needed, and especially our veterans in the veterans home -- homes, I should say. Their funding was cut and they were having to pay out of pocket to go see their out-of-network doctors. So doctors that they have been seeing for years, who had all their medical history and records and everything, they were being told that if they wanted to go see them that they had to pay out of pocket for transportation to get to and from there.

That's just not right. I mean, you have these vets who served our nation, who did their job, who upheld their end of the contract, and we were falling short as far as taking care of their needs and their necessities, really. It took a lot, but we were able to receive the additional funding that was needed -- which, at that time, was only an additional million dollars. When you're looking at a 35-plus billion dollar budget, a million dollars is a drop in the bucket; I mean it's something that we should easily be able to do for our veterans to make sure that they have the transportation needed.

I applaud DMVA for recognizing that there is an issue with transportation, but my question is, what efforts are being taken to correct the issues? We can address the issues and say we recognize them, but what are

we doing to fix them. I mean, that's a pet peeve of mine. I know that funding has since been taken away. It's very frustrating. It feels like we're taking a step back. There are these other programs, and Mr. O'Connell is absolutely correct -- we have every program under the sun when it comes to transportation, but none of them work together, none of them are really working in conjunction, and a lot of it is volunteer-based on the local level.

So for me here in Cape May County, we have the DVA, and they provide transportation for veterans to Philadelphia and Wilmington, Delaware, but that's all volunteer-based. The vans were donated, they had to fundraise to be able to maintain the vehicles, and they had to fundraise to be able to pay for the gas. These individuals driving the veterans, they're not being paid for; they're not being compensated. Every year they are handed a plaque and they are told "thank you." But beyond that, that's all they're receiving in return. I just think that's shameful. I think that we-- For the cost, for a minimal cost, we could be providing a better service all around to our veterans.

So, I mean, starting off there, that is something that we could very much be doing better. I thought we were going in the right direction, and I feel like we have taken a step back. So I think we need to really regroup and figure out how to move forward again with that.

With other issues with our veterans coming home, as a young veteran myself I feel very -- I feel like I had a great support system when I came home. Not every veteran has a great support system, not every veteran knows what they're entitled to. We create these benefits and we create these incentives for our veterans, but we don't really inform them of how to be able to receive them. We don't tell them what they're actually eligible for. I think

we really need to do a better job as far as promoting what our veterans are entitled to.

One big thing that is another frustration: We had contracts set aside, created, for our veterans. So every State contract-- So a set amount of State contracts that go out to bid would be set aside for veterans. This is a great program that we created, but do you know how many times it's been utilized since its been created? Basically zero. Veteran business owners have no idea that it even exists. On top of that, the program itself is just in shambles right now. I don't know where it has fallen apart; I know there are actions being taken place at the moment. I believe there is a group in the state that is looking at hiring attorneys to correct this.

But it's not something that we should be correcting. It's something that should be, again, working smoothly, and something that should be there for our vets.

Sorry, I have another call coming in.

But yes, there's a lot that we should be doing for our veterans. There's a lot more that we can be doing for our veterans. It's great that some of us acknowledge that we are falling short; but acknowledging it, and taking action and doing better is different altogether.

So, Madam Chair, again, I thank you for allowing me the time today. Members, it's great to see some of you.

And thank you again for the time.

MS. PINO MURPHY: Chairwoman Tucker, I don't have anyone else listed to speak.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Okay, so I just got a text--

MR. CRAWLEY: Madam Speaker, may I interject?

Again, this is Joe Crawley, Benefit Protection Person for the Disabled American Veterans.

Our one problem is that there is no set communication. I was on a committee at East Orange as a veteran representative, and there is no one way to reach out to the veterans, okay, especially the homeless vet. The older generation -- myself included, okay -- are not computer literate, okay, not even for the basics. And when we need stuff done, we go to our grandkids to fix our computers.

The second thing is that, why do we wait until the dam breaks before we fix it? The Federal government, I don't know how many of millions of dollars have been set aside for fixing our infrastructure. Why hasn't the infrastructure been fixed as needed, okay? This is on Federal and State issues, okay. We wait until millions of dollars have to be allocated, when small investment and repairing something, versus a large investment for major changes -- okay?

An example is the bridges that are being built in New Jersey because of the -- going between like Jersey City and stuff. Our demographics are changing, and we need to have changes both in transportation and the way that we do business. The people of New Jersey, mainly the disabled veterans, need to be identified. And yes, most of them are in South Jersey, but-- Chairperson Tucker, you and I, because I live in your District, know that there are disabled American veterans up here. There is no one place to go for information.

Like we said with DMVA, there is a whole bunch of groups out there that need to be centralized, and enforce that if-- If they say they are going to do something, they have to be held to that accountability, okay? If

you have a job, Assemblywoman Tucker, and if you didn't do what you do, you would be voted out, correct?

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Right.

MR. CRAWLEY: And it's not on-- And this is something that has to be done with our transportation system. It's not just-- Mainly for disabled people, but transportation in New Jersey is horrendous. Everything is out on the east coast; there are no train lines that run down the west coast of New Jersey. All our transportation systems are based in one area. And these things have to be rectified.

I'm open to any questions.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Thank you, sir, thank you for your comments.

At this time, I am going to -- since we've heard from all our speakers, we're going to give our Assembly and our Senate people a chance to make their statements or ask any questions.

So we're going to start off with -- we're going to give the honor of starting off to Senator Cryan.

SENATOR CRYAN: Well thank you, Madam Chair. I've got a lot of questions, but I won't tie up the Committee's time.

Everything from the transportation issues to the -- I didn't realize that for someone who has served our country with a disability -- a pension of \$750 a year. This has been an educational forum like no other, so I'm grateful for it. We'll certainly have enough follow-up to do.

And to the members who spoke, thank you so much. We value your time and are grateful for it. I think some of you will be heading back

over towards the Senate side of the aisle, as you can educate some of our colleagues as well, if we get the opportunity to do so.

Madam Chair, again, thank you for your graciousness, and we look forward to working with you for a solution to these issues.

I will be jumping off for a work meeting at 11:30 a.m., but I thank you very much.

Thank you.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Okay, some of our members are still on the Zoom call.

ASSEMBLYMAN CONAWAY: Assemblyman Conaway, here.

I just, again, want to thank you, Madam Chair, for holding this hearing. It has been very informative, as the Senator has pointed out, and clearly we need to do something about the transportation issues. As dense as we are, and as much and as many roadways as we have, that combination of density and just the way the network runs, and public transportation runs can make it very difficult for veterans to get where they need to go here in a small state such as ours.

I am disappointed to hear about the funding cut that was made to the transportation program. I hope that as the budget cycle restarts, that we will be able to address that, and as we do, that we really look to find a new way of providing a very valuable service for those who, it has been mentioned, earned the help and support that they do get from our state.

So we're on the case, thank you for putting us on the case. I want to thank those who have offered such important information to us today; we will follow up with you on that.

Thanks for my colleagues participating, again.

To you, Madam Chair, for convening us and putting this information on the public record.

Thanks for your time.

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Assemblyman DeAngelo. (no response)

Assemblyman Bergen.

A S S E M B L Y M A N B R I A N B E R G E N: Madam Chair, thank you for allowing me to speak.

I realize there was some confusion for me coming on, and I just wanted to clarify to you, Madam Chairwoman, that my intent was to request permission through you to attend; and it seems like there was some confusion, and for that I apologize. I am grateful that you are allowing me an opportunity to testify briefly.

I just want to say, first and foremost, I think this type of meeting is fantastic. This type of exploratory meeting with the veterans, particularly disabled veterans, is something that is much needed and I think will generate tremendous results.

I am a veteran myself, I am a Vice Commander of Morris County for the American Legion; I am a District Commander -- Vice Commander, pardon me -- for the VFW. So I am very active in veterans organizations across the state, and I don't know that this is a first-of-its-kind meeting, but it's a very important one.

And I appreciate you, Madam Chair, for getting the testimony of these different veterans.

One thing that I would like to add, that maybe you and the new Senate Chair, Senator Cryan, can consider over the course of the next

legislative session, is that we could get hundreds of different small groups of veterans together and we will constantly unearth gaps. There's just so many gaps in the services provided for our veterans all across the state, and quite frankly the nation, that to fill those gaps -- it would be a challenging undertaking and you'll always be missing stuff.

So what I would like to offer is maybe we can consider some larger scale, bolder approaches in the future; one of which I have proposed in the past, which is a property tax exemption for disabled veterans, and just try to get money back in these peoples' pockets so they can self-satisfy some of the gaps that exist.

Just to give you one brief example of how that might help. Mr. Nyzio -- and pardon me if I'm saying your name incorrectly -- mentioned that he is blind in a single eye. Under the vet VA benefits, somebody blind in a single eye may not be 100% disabled, and may be 70% disabled. And that person is entitled to very little relief, whereas somebody who is considered blind in both eyes is 100% disabled and entitled to a *tremendous* amount more in relief, including paying no property taxes in this state.

So there are some measures we can do, like giving property tax exemptions based on disability rating, that would help someone out in Mr. Nyzio's case, that doesn't quite qualify for 100%.

And there are some other particularly bold measures I think that can be taken. The point that I'd just like to make, Madam Chair and Senator Cryan, is that we often try to solve each individual topic that comes up, and I think it might be healthy for us and for the veteran community if we look at some bigger, bolder approaches that might, again, help the veterans to self-

satisfy or self-correct some of these things, through giving them this compensation they deserve.

One last thing I would just like--

ASSEMBLYWOMAN TUCKER: Thank you so much for your comments.

We do have a time restriction, and I thank you for your comments. We appreciate your comments.

I would like to thank everybody for taking the time out to come to this hearing today. I have to thank Bill Graves for bringing some of these issues to my attention. And in order for me to set up this call today, he gave me a call back in December, I think it was -- I had a conversation with Mr. Graves in reference to the transportation issue and other issues that the disabled veterans are facing.

So I would like to thank him for bringing it to my attention, so I was able to have this meeting to hear some of the things that we thought were not being properly done. And now we find out that they don't have the services that they really need, and some of the issues that have taken place with our veterans. And we're going to work together with the Senate and the Assembly to address some of these issues, and try to find legislation that will take care of these issues to make sure that you are--

I have one bill that I've been working on for about 10 years, and it's called A Vet is a Vet, that will give every vet in the State of New Jersey - - to be able to receive all the services that they need. Because I felt this was necessary, and not to just be recognizing some of the vets; I think all the vets that serve our country should be recognized.

So, I would like to thank the staff for their participation; and everybody that joined this Committee hearing today, thank you again. And we will be working on something, we will be getting back to you, and hopefully the next time we meet we can have a public meeting, but due to the pandemic we were limited to what we can do at this time.

But we will be working on it regardless of whether we're in-person or on Zoom. This is something we are going to take a serious look at, and work on something so we can get something to our veterans who are in need of these services.

And thank you so much again for attending the meeting today.

Thank you.

(MEETING CONCLUDED)