



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Robert G. Ortt

ORTT SECURES \$185,000 TO BRING DWYER PROGRAM TO NIAGARA COUNTY

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LOCKPORT – State Senator Rob Ortt (R,C,I – North Tonawanda), Chairman of the Senate Committee on Mental Health and member of the Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security and Military Affairs, today announced he secured \$185,000 to implement the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program in Niagara County.

The non-clinical program offers peer-to-peer counseling between veterans who personally understand the psychological and emotional effects of combat.

“I’m honored to bring the highly-successful Dwyer program – and its anonymous, peer-to-peer counseling – right here to Niagara County,” said **Senator Ort**. “Whether it’s talking to a fellow soldier, or not having to worry about the stigma associated with seeking help, Dwyer offers critical benefits to veterans in need. While we’ve drawn down our military presence overseas, we have a generation of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with physical and emotional scars that they carry with them every single day. We cannot allow them to carry those scars and that burden alone.”

The Dwyer Program is named after PFC Joseph Dwyer, a U.S. Army combat medic with service in Iraq who died in 2008 at the age of 31 from a reported accidental overdose. For years, Dwyer had been suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which also brought on depression and substance abuse.

An estimated 22 veterans commit suicide every day nationwide. To cut down on the number of deaths, the Dwyer Program provides suicide prevention/intervention initiatives and access to outreach programs. Additionally, it allows veterans to anonymously talk about their issues with other veterans while helping to treat or manage the effects of PTSD and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI).

According to a 2014 report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, more than 18,000 veterans live throughout Niagara County. The state funding successfully secured by Senator Ort in this year’s budget, will allow the Dwyer Program to be operated by the county’s Veterans and Mental Health departments.

Niagara County Legislator Wm. Keith McNall, R-Lockport, who chairs the Legislature's Community Services Committee, said the Dwyer grant would be a welcome tool to “help our veterans help themselves and each other.”

“Niagara County is grateful to Sen. Ortt for his assistance in obtaining this much-needed funding for these worthwhile programs,” **McNall** said. “Our veterans have given much to us, particularly at this time of conflict around the globe, and as a community we have an absolute obligation to help our returning heroes realize the full benefits of the freedom they have defended.”

Director of Veterans Services in Niagara County Nina Cabrera said, “Niagara County veterans deserve all the support and resources their community has to offer. Niagara County Veterans Service Agency welcomes all productive efforts to assist veterans and their families especially after having served our great nation.”

The Dwyer Program already operates in Erie County, at Veterans One-stop Center (VOC) of Western New York. The VOC of WNY will work collaboratively with Niagara County Veterans Service Agency and the Niagara County Department of Mental Health to implement the program in Niagara County.

Veterans One-stop Center President & CEO Roger L. Woodworth said, “Since its implementation in Erie County in 2013, the Dwyer Program has been critical in not only fostering connections among and between our Warriors and family, and their communities, but in providing a non-clinical conduit to the resources and initiatives our Warriors and families may need in order to achieve economic success, housing stability, and emotional health and well-being. Most importantly though, the Dwyer Program fosters hope and purpose, while proving an opportunity for service after service.”

Veterans One-stop Center Vice-Chairman Col. John Higgins said, “The Veterans One-stop Center of WNY is extremely proud and honored to have been chosen to partner with Niagara County in implementing the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program expansion in Niagara County. We look forward to working with Niagara County, their Veterans Service Agency, and others in quickly bringing the Dwyer Program to Niagara County and to those who sacrificed so much in defense of the United States.”

Director of Niagara County Department of Mental Health Laura Kelemen said, “Negative labels, fear of losing status or benefits, and other negative consequences related to the stigma of mental health diagnoses all too often prevent Veterans who experience PTSD, depression, substance abuse and related illness from seeking help. Peer-to-Peer projects, such as the Joseph P. Dwyer Program, seek to eliminate these barriers. Veterans, who uniquely understand the experience of serving, provide support, encouragement, and advocacy to fellow veterans on a path toward recovery and healing.”

She continued, “The Niagara County Department of Mental Health is very grateful to Senator Ortt for securing funding that will support the expansion of these critical services to Veterans in our community. It is our community’s obligation to ensure that those who served to protect our county and our freedom receive care for all of their injuries, both physical and psychological.”

The Dwyer Program was created as part of the 2012 – 2013 New York State Budget. Since then, the program has been implemented in more than a dozen counties throughout the state.

Pictured outside Niagara County Legislative Chambers (left to right): Niagara County Legislature Chairman Bill Ross; Niagara County Department of Mental Health Director Laura Kelemen; Niagara County Legislator Wm. Keith McNall; Senator Rob Ortt; Veterans One-stop Center Vice-Chairman Col. John Higgins; Niagara County Clerk Wayne Jagow; Niagara County Legislator Tony Nemi