



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Daniel G. Stec

## Stec, GOP colleagues want governor to fund veterans mental health program

DANIEL G. STEC March 24, 2021

| ISSUE: **JOSEPH DWYER PEER-TO-PEER VETERANS' SUPPORT PROGRAM**



As the April 1 deadline for approval of New York State's Final Budget nears, Senate Republican Leader Rob Ortt and members of the Senate Republican Conference were joined by Congressman Lee Zeldin in calling on Governor Andrew Cuomo to restore funding for the PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veterans' Support Program. The Dwyer Program provides essential peer-to-peer mental health support to veterans across New York State and has been immensely impactful in providing veterans with much-needed emotional assistance during

reintegration into civilian life.

“As a combat veteran, I fully understand the difference the services provided by the Joseph P. Dwyer Program can make in the lives of our veterans who are struggling. The need for these critically important services has never been more important, and they should be made permanent. We cannot forget that our veterans are a valued community that have served their country and deserve this and more,” said Leader Ortt, a NY Army National Guard veteran who served in Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Joseph P. Dwyer was a United States Army combat medic in the Iraq War who was portrayed in an iconic photo carrying a young Iraqi boy away from danger. After PFC Dwyer’s return home from service overseas, he struggled with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. Congressman Lee Zeldin was instrumental in the creation of the Dwyer Program during his time as a New York State Senator.

“The PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Veteran Support Program saves lives, and at a time when so many of our communities’ veterans feel more isolated than ever before, funding for this critical program has never been more important. This effective, efficient and tailored program has always received bipartisan support from our local governments up to the State Capitol. However, year after year, this veterans program has been cut off and used as a political ploy in Albany’s budget negotiations, and playing games with our veterans’ lives is unacceptable. Not only must full funding for the Dwyer Program be restored in this year’s final budget, but this program’s funding must become a permanent component of all future state budgets,” said Congressman Zeldin, a U.S. Army veteran who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom.

On March 15, the State Senate Majority released its one-house budget bill with a proposal of \$4.5 million for funding the Dwyer program, which is the same funding level adopted in Fiscal Year 2021. In contrast, the State Assembly Majority’s one-house bill proposed \$6.05

million. In light of this development, the elected officials are demanding that Governor Cuomo approve the Assembly proposal, which would be, quite literally, life-saving.

“The Joseph P. Dwyer Program has been a resounding success, beginning in Suffolk County and expanding to counties across the State. The program, which connects veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress or traumatic brain injury, was unfortunately cut in the Governor’s Executive Budget, but I look forward to the Legislature fully restoring this critical funding in the Enacted Budget. Our veterans sacrificed for us—we owe it to them to ensure they are provided the services they need when they return home,” said Senator Weik, the representative of Congressman Zeldin’s former 3rd Senate District, and a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security, and Military Affairs.

“The experiences shared and challenges faced are the basis for very unique bonds that military men and women have. Trust among these men and women is what enables them to open up and get the help they need. The Joseph P. Dwyer program makes that connection. Funding for this program is in doubt every year and that’s a shame. The Governor last year during the early days of COVID said ‘And if everything we do saves just one life, I’ll be happy.’ Well how about applying that same goal to our veterans and fund this program,” said Senator Dan Stec, an 8-year Navy veteran who served in the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm.

“As the representative of Fort Drum and an area of our state that is home to a significant number of veterans, I have seen firsthand the positive impact of the Joseph P. Dwyer Program. Far too often, our nation’s heroes are inflicted with wounds of war we cannot see and need extra support as they work to reintegrate into civilian life. The Joseph P. Dwyer Program provides that support and it is critically important that funding for it is fully restored in the enacted state budget,” said Senator Patty Ritchie, the representative of the

U.S. Army Base Fort Drum in the 48th Senate District, and ranking member of the Senate Committee on Veterans, Homeland Security, and Military Affairs.

Last year's Final State Budget included \$4.5 million in funding for the Dwyer Program, although a large portion was withheld by the Executive for months on end. The Governor's budget proposal this year left out the Dwyer Program entirely.

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