

'Preserving the Memory' of Long Island's KIAs

A marathon and race series on Long Island benefits multiple veterans causes, and in 2023, four VFW Posts were the recipients of grants to be used in the community

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Four VFW Posts on Long Island, New York, were selected this year to receive grants from the Suffolk County Grant Program. The grants are funded through the Suffolk County Veterans Marathon & Half Marathon, which just celebrated its eighth year.

Lindenhurst Post 7279, Rocky Point Post 6249, Sayville Post 433 and Huntington Station Post 1469 each received a grant for the work the members do in the community.

In Rocky Point, for example, Post members consistently give back to the community in a variety of ways. For instance, they support the Long Island State Veterans Home and provide a hand up to families who need it and make frequent visits to the area schools.

Most recently, the Post celebrated the grand opening of its Suffolk County WWII and Military History Museum. Located in the former Rocky Point train depot across the street from the VFW Post, the museum aims to tell the stories of Long Island war veterans.

VFW Post 6249 Commander Joe Cognito said the museum helps fulfill the Post's mission of educating youth by introducing them to the wartime experiences of their local veterans.

According to then-Suffolk County Veterans Services Director Tom Ronayne, more than \$1 million has been raised over eight years and has directly benefited veterans' groups on Long Island.

"We have raised \$1.1 million since this all started," said Ronayne, a Navy veteran and Life member of VFW Post 1469. "Every nickel has gone back to the veterans' community, and we have done this with zero cost to the government."

NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS

406 W. 34th Street
Kansas City, MO 64111
Office 816.756.3390
Fax 816.968.1157

WASHINGTON OFFICE

200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002
Office 202.543.2239
Fax 202.543.6719

info@vfw.org
www.vfw.org

Ronayne said that organizations such as VFW Posts submit grant applications that are then reviewed by a committee. He noted that grants cannot be used to fund capital improvements. Instead, the committee selects those groups looking to better their communities by, for example, working on youth programs or hosting ward parties in hospitals and nursing homes or organizing coat drives.

With more than 1.5 million residents, Suffolk County has more veterans than all of New York state's 62 counties. For that reason, Ronayne said the county works very hard to deliver the "highest level of service possible" to veterans and active-duty troops, as well as National Guard and Reserve troops.

Ronayne added that former Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone made veterans a priority during his tenure. Bellone, an Army veteran, finished his 12-year term as county executive on Dec. 31.

"Suffolk County is home to the largest population of veterans in New York state, and as such, we feel a strong obligation to provide them with the best services and support possible when they return home," Bellone said. "That is exactly what the Suffolk County Marathon is all about — raising money for local veterans' services. I am extremely proud that we were able to surpass our goal of raising \$1 million to support our nation's heroes."

Ronayne said that in addition to VFW Posts, the Veterans Yoga Project and Warrior Ranch are among the groups supported by the marathon's competitive grant program.

"The race entirely pays for itself in addition to providing significant financial support to the community," Ronayne said.

'A POWERFUL LEGACY'

The marathon grew out of the Veterans Race Series, which consists of nine other races that are "military or veteran centric" in Suffolk County.

"Each race serves as an opportunity to provide information and awareness of both the services and resources available to veterans in Suffolk County," Ronayne said. "We have experienced significant growth in the participant numbers as the race series has expanded."

On the marathon weekend, which is typically in October, a Family Fun Run and Freedom Fest also takes place. Veterans' employment counselors, the local VA, food merchants and live musicians turn out to make the Freedom Fest a success, according to Ronayne.

"The marathon also features the Road of Remembrance," Ronayne said. "It is one mile of the race where we have photos of each of Suffolk County's KIAs. It is a solemn mile. There is no cheering or hydration stations."

One of the races in the series is the Lt. Michael Murphy Run Around the Lake. Murphy was born and raised on Long Island, where he served as a lifeguard at Lake Ronkonkoma. After graduating from Penn State University, he joined the Navy SEALs.

In June 2005, Murphy was killed in a firefight along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border during Operation Red Wings. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor.

Ronayne said over the years, the marathons and the race series have engaged the community in a new way, while also supporting veterans.

“I love that this is such a powerful legacy issue,” Ronayne said. “It preserves the memory of these men we have lost. Wouldn’t it be awesome if some folks reading this would replicate this model?”

This article is featured in the 2024 February issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Janie Dyhouse](#), senior editor for VFW magazine.