

LONG ISLAND / POLITICS

Reducing police suicides is aim of \$500G in proposed federal funding



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Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) is flanked by relatives of law enforcement officers who died by suicide as she speaks about funds for police mental health during a news conference at Nassau PBA Headquarters in Plainview on Tuesday. Credit: Newsday/Thomas A. Ferrara

By John Asbury

john.asbury@newsday.com [X](#) [JohnAsbury](#)

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Police on Long Island say they hope \$500,000 in federal funding will help officers manage mental health and reduce the number of officer suicides statewide.

Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-N.Y.) met with families of fallen officers and the Nassau County Police Benevolent Association at the association's office in Plainview on Tuesday to announce the proposed funding for the nonprofit New York Law Enforcement Assistance Program, or NYLEAP.

Gillibrand stood with police officials and families of officers who died by suicide, including NYPD Officer Richard Catapano, 31; Nassau County Lt. Billy Erdmann, 53; Nassau Police Officer Joseph Stassi, 49; and Glen Cove Police Officer Brian Genova, 50.

Catapano's mother, Kim Herweck, of Bellmore, said her son dreamed of being a police officer like his father and was assigned to the NYPD's plainclothes anti-crime unit to help take guns off the street. She said the anti-crime unit was abandoned in 2020 and he took his own life after four years on the job.

"Richie felt like his life didn't have meaning anymore," Herweck said. "He felt like everything was taken away."

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She said there needed to be more support for officers to make them feel comfortable discussing the stress of the job.

"I think that there's a huge stigma associated with police officers and their jobs," Herweck said. "Being able to talk confidentially and with peers, people who have been through what they've experienced are going to tell them that there's light at the end of the tunnel."

The congressionally directed spending for NYLEAP would allow the organization to expand clinical support programs and training to officers following traumatic incidents, including officer involved shootings or responding to calls such as a death of a child, said Jim Banish, NYLEAP president.

"We take broken people and send them away with hope and support," Banish said.

Gillibrand cited a Ruderman Family Foundation study that found law enforcement officers and firefighters are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty.

"We are losing some of our best and brightest every year in succumbing to mental health issues and coming to suicide, and we need to not only protect our first responders and their families, but we also need to protect the public," Gillibrand said. "When our first responders can't do their jobs, they can't keep the public safe."

Nassau County has lost three officers to suicide this year, said Tommy Shevlin, Nassau County PBA president.

"We need to back our police officers and our first responders," Shevlin said. "They risk their lives every day for our communities that we serve, and they struggle silently."



By **John Asbury**

john.asbury@newsday.com  [JohnAsbury](#)

John Asbury is a breaking news and general assignment reporter. He has been with Newsday since 2014 and previously worked at The Press-Enterprise in Riverside, California.
