

NEWS FROM Legislator

# Lou D'Amaro



SUFFOLK COUNTY LEGISLATURE  
17<sup>th</sup> Legislative District  
130 West Jericho Turnpike  
Huntington Station, NY 11746  
Tel: (631) 854-4433  
Fax: (631) 854-4415  
Lou.Damaro@suffolkcountyny.gov



**COMMITTEES:**

VICE CHAIR – Environment,  
Planning & Agriculture  
MEMBER – Veterans & Seniors  
MEMBER – Budget & Finance

Contact: Justin Littell (631) 854-4433

[Justin.Littell@suffolkcountyny.gov](mailto:Justin.Littell@suffolkcountyny.gov)

## Legislature Approves Equitable Health Center Budget Cuts

### Bill Restores Imperative Funding for the Dolan Family Health Center

*(Huntington Station, NY... June 27, 2011)* – In another major victory for Huntington residents, the Suffolk County Legislature recently agreed to a proposal that will immediately restore an additional \$165,000 in New York State imposed funding cuts to the Dolan Family Health Center.

Specifically, a resolution sponsored by Suffolk County Legislators Lou D'Amaro (D-Huntington Station) and Kate Browning (WFP-Shirley) was unanimously approved at the June 21<sup>st</sup> General Legislature Meeting. The bill, which codifies a new policy of fair and equitable budget reductions at the County's six contracted family health centers, comes on the heels of another \$300,000 restoration for both Dolan and the Elsie Owens North Brookhaven Family Health Center in Coram that Legislator D'Amaro secured two weeks ago. The recent flurry of legislation has been in response to the New York State Department of Health's \$15 million "claw back" of funding for critical health care services. The Dolan Center was disproportionately impacted by the State claw back, and stood to lose \$1.1 million prior to the passage of D'Amaro's bills. Now, that reduction has been nearly halved to \$635,000, putting Dolan's funding cut on par with the County's other contracted health centers.

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“Since New York State unilaterally took back \$15 million in vital funding for County health centers, I have been fighting to ensure that the cuts be spread out equally amongst the County’s six centers,” said Legislator D’Amaro. “This untenable situation requires shared sacrifice, so that one or two communities in Suffolk are not singled out and required to bear additional burdens. The passage of this bill accomplishes that goal and guarantees that none of the County’s health centers will be forced to close.”

New York State’s retroactive disallowance of funding, for services already rendered to the public, forced County Executive Steve Levy to cut funding for County health centers across the board. However, the impacts were particularly debilitating for Dolan and Elsie Owens, two community health centers serving poor, largely minority populations. Dolan, for instance, was targeted to lose 40% of its annual allocation of Suffolk County funding, a significant blow that would lead to staff reductions and the elimination of patient visits for a facility that serves 9,100 individuals – approximately 5% of the entire population of the Township of Huntington - every year. D’Amaro’s bill reduces the cuts to approximately 20% for all of the County centers.

“I was very happy to hear of the fairness guaranteed by the Suffolk County Legislature when they mandated that cuts to funding for health centers must be shared equally among all health centers,” said Terrence Smith, the Dolan Health Center Administrator. “Over 9,000 uninsured and working poor individuals from the Township of Huntington who rely on the Dolan Family Health Center are no less deserving of County support for their health center than are the folks who rely on health centers in other Long Island townships.”

In addition to establishing equitable funding cuts, the resolution specifically states that the “County of Suffolk rejects any budgetary reductions that will force the closure of any County health center.” This is a critical policy initiative in light of the fact that the Elsie Owens Center was slated to close its doors without an immediate influx of funding. The bill gives the Health Commissioner the discretion to administer the balanced reductions and move funding around as needed to allow all County health centers to remain open. It also makes clear that any new funds received by the County from the State for previously rendered patient services shall be shared equitably among the County’s centers. This clause ensures that none of the centers will be shortchanged if the County is successful in its ongoing negotiations with New York State for even more restorations.

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D'Amaro's bill once again garnered the support of the other Huntington- area County Legislators.

“From day one, there has been a broad consensus in the Legislature that financial cuts to our health centers had to be of an equal percentage across-the-board in order to be fair and equitable,” says Legislative Majority Leader Jon Cooper (D- Lloyd Harbor). “These funding restorations will allow the Dolan Family Health Center to keep their doors open so they can continue to serve thousands of uninsured and underinsured residents of northwestern Suffolk County.”

“This is an important initiative to enable the Dolan Family Health Center to continue serving the needs of our community,” added Legislator Steve Stern (D-Huntington). “However, the failure of New York State to properly fund the Dolan Center is grossly irresponsible and places our community at risk. The Dolan Center is cost effective and provides a high level of care to the Huntington community. I urge State lawmakers to restore funding to Suffolk County immediately so that our health centers can continue to operate at the highest level and protect the health of our most vulnerable citizens.”

The equitable funding cuts bill now goes before County Executive Levy, who is expected to sign the resolution into law.

“This bill is another huge step in the right direction toward restoring fairness for both the Dolan and Elsie Owens health centers,” said D'Amaro. “Residents serviced by these centers can rest assured that the facilities will not close and force patients to seek care at far more inconvenient locations like hospital emergency rooms. The law also requires any new State funds to be shared equally amongst all the centers, which will positively impact our communities as we continue to work cooperatively together with our State officials to permanently resolve this issue.”

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Suffolk County Legislator Lou D'Amaro (D-Huntington Station) represents the 17<sup>th</sup> Legislative District, which includes parts of North Babylon, Deer Park, Dix Hills, Melville, West Hills, Huntington, South Huntington, and Huntington Station. He is Vice-Chairman of the Environment, Planning & Agriculture committee and a member of the Budget & Finance and Veterans & Seniors committees of the Suffolk County Legislature.