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2021 Joint Legislative Public Protection Hearing Testimony

Submitted on behalf of the
Police Benevolent Association
of New York State

By: **Manuel Vilar, Vice President & CAO**

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Testimony by: Manuel Vilar
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Testimony before: Joint Legislative Hearing Committee on Public Protection

Date of Hearing: February 10, 2021

Hello, Chairwomen Krueger and Weinstein, and other members of the Public Protection Committee.

My name is Manuel Vilar, and I am the Founding President and current Vice President Chief Administrative Officer of the Police Benevolent Association of New York State. In addition to my PBA position, I am a 37-year veteran NYS Park Police Sergeant living and working on Long Island.

I am here today to advocate for the merger of the NYS Park Police into the New York State Police (Senate Bill 4647 Sponsored by Senator Gounardes). The NYS Park Police is a division within the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation and currently under command and control of the Division of State Police. NYS Park Police are entrusted with the public safety of over 78 million patrons at 215 state parks and historic sites encompassing 350,000 acres including 28 golf courses, 35 swimming pools, 67 beaches, 18 museums and nature centers, NY state waterways, snowmobile trails, all-terrain vehicle trails and thousands of miles of roadways and parkways.

State Park Police routinely respond to calls for service throughout NYS alongside NYS Troopers. State Park Police can be found during natural disasters conducting snowmobile and swift-water rescues, and during the recent civil unrest in multiple areas of NYS, the State Park Police were deployed.

During the current COVID-19 crisis State Park Police have been at the forefront of protecting testing and vaccinations sites; some located at various State Parks as well as non-state park locations. Several State Park Police Officers including myself have contracted COVID-19.

NYS Parks by their very nature are geographically challenging beautiful and yet dangerous places. To perform these duties, State Park Police Officers receive the same training as State Troopers plus specialized training to be prepared to assist patrons when crimes, accidents or other life threatening incidents occur.

Upon graduation in April of 2019 State Park Police had a staffing level of 256 Police Officers and Supervisors. As of February 9, 2021 staffing has declined to 222 members, with several more processing to leave. That's a 15% loss to our force in less than 2 years. In 2010 State Park Police resumed Police Academy training after a multi-year pause due to the 2007 financial crises. By 2010 State Park Police staffing had dwindled to a dangerous low of 190

members. After 6 Park Police Academies classes graduated 130 Officers only 83 remain, a 45 % over 8 years. Looking back to 2000 State Park Police have trained over 500 Police Officers only to lose an unstainable 53% for a total 255 Officers. To train all those Police Officers, there have been 16 State Park Police academies at the cost of 3 to 5 million dollars per academy, per year, or in other words 48 to 80 million dollars.

The cause of the dramatic attrition boils down to simple economics. First, on Average, a State Trooper earns between 30,000 dollars to 45,000 dollars more per year, has a 20-year pension plan and a 3/4 disability should a member become injured and unable to return to full duty. Second, adversely impacting not only the Park Police but the University Police, Environmental Conservation Police and the NYS Forest rangers is the slow walking of collective bargaining and implementation of the 2015 – 2018 Binding Arbitration award by the Governor's office which has left all PBA members stuck on a 2014 salary level.

With the above said New York State is facing a perfect storm where lousy economic policy and a failure to apply sound fiscal management has created the dramatic attrition of personnel. OPRHP has not properly equipped the Park Police to do their basic job functions. Many State Parks go unpatrolled or seldom see a State Park Police Officer during the busiest time of year.

State Parks have had some form of law enforcement starting with the first state park, Niagara Falls State Park, in 1885. After the creation of the NYS Troopers in 1917, police coverage was handed over to the State Troopers. Then in 1946 the Park / Parkway Police were carved out of the State Troopers by Robert Moses. In 1980, the partial merger occurred transferring many Parkway Police Officers back to the State Troopers and established Troop L on Long Island. 1995 began a 7-year administrative takeover of the State Park Police after police malfeasance, and dereliction of duty by the command staff was discovered. In 2003, control of the State Park Police force was handed back over to NYS Parks with the recommendation that the State Park Police be merged into the State Troopers and all police services be performed by the State Police. State Parks choose not to accept the recommendation and once again decide to maintain a Park Police Force with the disastrous results which I have detailed above.

Because of State Parks inability to operate and maintain a viable functioning State Park Police force, for the safety of the public and our members we are requesting that the NYS Legislature pass a NYS Trooper Park Police Merger Bill which we have submitted.

The merger legislation we propose is not a new concept but rather similar to the 1980 Parkway Police Trooper merger legislation, and we hope you will champion the bill to make State Parks safer and save lives. This legislation has a 16-million-dollar retrospective and \$1.5 million prospective cost. A merger will immediately eliminate the 53 percent attrition rate and the need for yearly Park Police Academies that cost 3 to 5 million dollars per academy. In short, within 3 to 5 years NYS will have recouped the initial cost and will be saving money.

This is a win-win for the park visitors as well as the taxpayer.

I urge your support want to thank you for the opportunity to present to you today.