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**2022 Joint Legislative Hearing
On Education
February 7, 2022**

Good morning/afternoon/evening Madame Chairwomen and respected members of the panel.

My name is Christopher Lacosse and I represent the University Police Officers and Investigators that currently work on the 29 State University of New York campuses. My testimony this evening will focus on the current needs of the New York State University Police.

As I begin my testimony, I would be remiss if I did not thank all of the legislators who have supported our members over the past several years. In particular, we appreciate the overwhelming support for our 20-year retirement bill last session. This legislation remains one of our top priorities as it would provide parity with 97% of police officers in the state as well as serve as an invaluable tool for recruitment, retention and promoting diversity within our agencies. Our member agencies are the pinnacle of community policing, and we share your commitment to ensuring that our officers represent the great cultural and ethnic diversity of New York state and our state university system.

We also wish to express our deepest appreciation to Governor Kathy Hochul who has done so much and continues to foster a spirit of civility and cooperation that has long been absent from the Capitol. Together I know that our members, the state legislature and Governor Hochul will do great things for the people of New York state.

New York state is home to the finest state higher education system in the nation with 64 campuses ranging from major research universities and medical centers to small community colleges in rural areas that ensure every New Yorker has access to educational opportunities regardless of their local residence or financial resources. Our campuses serve more than 1.5 million students and employ more than 32,000 faculty

members and an additional 60,000 non-faculty staff and administrators. It is the job of the New York State University Police to ensure that everyone who studies at, works on and visits our campuses is free from danger and harassment and has access to needed public safety services provided by a professional, highly trained and diverse police force that is sensitive and responsive to each individual.

Our job is becoming increasingly dangerous. While popular entertainment likes to portray campus safety as little more than dealing with underage drinking, hijinks and campus parking, the reality is college campuses are a microcosm of society at large. In addition to all of the law enforcement and public health challenges brought about by COVID, New York State University Police deal with drug overdoses, mental health crises, larceny and altercations on a daily basis.

In the past few weeks there were high-profile assaults on campuses in Albany and Brockport including menacing with a firearm and a stabbing, along with a myriad of other charges ranging from unlawful imprisonment to strangulation. Since 2007 our University Police have trained for active shooter and other threats of violence on our campuses and are equipped to address any foreseeable threat. It is a sad reality across the nation and is not an indictment on our state university system or any other. The simple reality is threats exist and we must be prepared to protect our campus communities.

Many of our campuses and facilities are also located in areas where violence is sadly the norm. This past July a shooting in Downtown Syracuse resulted in ambulances rushing the wounded to Upstate Medical Center. A member of the clergy, who responded to the call to minister to the families of the victims, came under fire and was shot when the emergency room ambulance bay came under fire. Two of our officers ran toward the sound of gunfire to bring bystanders to safety – including the wounded clergymen. When one thinks of campus police, being caught up in a drive by is not what comes to mind. Assemblyman Stirpe, Senator May and Governor Hochul all issued proclamations recognizing these officers for their bravery and selflessness. I can tell you they were both humbled and perhaps a little embarrassed by the attention bestowed upon them. I can also tell you that every UPO was grateful for the recognition and support received from this body and from Governor Hochul.

While our Upstate Officers were able to respond to this incident, New York State University Police are hampered in their ability to protect the greater community at large due to their limited geographic jurisdiction. Currently, University Police who are more

than 100 yards off campus are only able to respond to certain incidents on their own. This means they may witness dangerous driving or harassment yet cannot respond. There is nothing more frustrating than taking an oath to protect the public and not being allowed to do so because the danger happens on the other side of an arbitrary line. New York State University Police Officers are competent, highly trained and professional law enforcement professionals tasked with investigating all crimes on our campuses. Statewide Geographic Area of Employment is the natural evolution of their authority and ability to protect not only their campus community but the public at large.

We also must be prepared to deal with violent altercations that are not the result of malice, but rather mental illness. Our officers are equipped with and trained to use tasers and other less than lethal means and methods that offer the opportunity to at first deescalate and if needed negate the threat in a manner that everyone can walk away from. Last year alone our officers responded to 1,200 calls for emotionally disturbed persons, welfare checkups, and custodial mental health and hygiene detentions. These calls are never easy; not for the person in crisis nor the officers responding. But we pride ourselves on the compassion we show in the toughest of circumstances to get the individual the mental health assistance they need.

Sadly, we can't prevent every tragedy that stems from mental illness. This past year the disappearance of a SUNY student in Buffalo ended in the unfortunate determination that she took her own life. Our officers scoured the area surrounding Niagara Falls in coordination with local, federal and state agencies and we fielded calls from across the nation with tips as to the student's location. We also prayed we would find her unharmed. Unfortunately, that was not the case. I can tell you, that shook our members to their core.

Another threat plaguing communities and campuses across the nation is the scourge of narcotics that claim countless lives and destroy families from all backgrounds. New York State University Police carry and are trained to administer naloxone to reverse opioid overdoses. I wish I could tell you that we rarely have to use it, in truth even once is too often. Our officers have saved dozens of lives by being in the right place, at the right time, with the right resources.

I began this testimony by mentioning our gratitude for your support of the 20-year retirement bill that our members so badly need to create parity with 97% of municipal and state police officers in New York, and to staunch the exodus of officers from our

agencies to those who offer better annual compensation along with a better retirement package. As you are aware our members are highly trained community policing professionals. We pioneered many of the community policing practices that are suddenly all the rage such as body cameras and de-escalation techniques. Why should a municipality train an officer to these standards and incur the expense when there are under-compensated state officers that can be enticed away?

As our campuses are among the most culturally rich communities in the state, it stands to reason that local agencies wish to poach our officers to meet their own diversity goals. This hurts the taxpayers of New York who foot the bill for the training of these men and women, and it hurts our students who often hail from neighborhoods that are radically different from their new campus environment. Our diverse officers are the bridge that can help these students adjust and acclimate to their new home through shared cultural and ethnic backgrounds.

The officers who transfer to other agencies tell us they don't want to leave - they have to leave. No person who puts their life on the line to protect another should also have to choose between working in the agency they love and paying their rent or putting their own child through college. When New York state called upon these women and men to choose the people of the Empire State over themselves and even their families, our officers answered the call. During the COVID pandemic we staffed testing and vaccination sites, collected and distributed PPE and often spent weeks separated from family so that we would not risk exposing them after we ourselves were exposed. Enactment of the 20-year retirement bill would go a long way toward saying thank you, your sacrifices are respected, and you are both wanted and appreciated as valued members of the SUNY family.

Governor Hochul indicated in her veto message for the 20-year bill that she is open to addressing this terrible retirement disparity as part of the state budget process. We ask the state legislature to join with the PBA to work hand in hand with Governor Hochul to make this long overdue change a reality for our members.

I look forward to meeting and working with you and your legislative colleagues, as well as representatives from the Hochul Administration, in the days ahead as we identify ways to protect our tremendous investment in America's premiere public university system. With your continued support we will remain, at the vanguard of innovative, compassionate and equitable policing in service to our diverse campus communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to share with you all a glimpse into the challenges facing campus policing. On behalf of my fellow New York State University Police officers, thank you again for your leadership and responsiveness to the needs of the community policing agencies that comprise the PBA of New York State.

Thank you