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**2024 Joint Legislative
Budget Hearing Testimony
Public Protection**

**Submitted on Behalf of the
Police Benevolent Association
Of New York State**

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My name is Kurt Nolan and I am the Executive Director and Counsel for the Police Benevolent Association of New York State, Inc. I have the honor of representing over 1100 police officers from the New York State University Police, New York State Park Police, New York State Environmental Conservation Officers, and New York State Forrest Rangers. On behalf of my members, I would like to thank you for this opportunity. Today, I will illustrate how the underfunding, pay disparity, and lack of pension parity impact recruitment, retention, and public safety.

Each of the four law enforcement agencies that employ my members are severely underfunded. I believe that this is a direct result of the fact that law enforcement and public safety are not the primary mission of these agencies. Investment in public safety is often overlooked when times are tough. To address these funding issues, our law enforcement agencies need fiscal autonomy. This autonomy would ensure that our police officers receive the training and equipment that they need.

The current budget for the Department of Environmental Conservation's (DEC's) Division of Law Enforcement (DLE) is approximately \$48,000,000. The hard work of DLE's 23 investigators generated approximately \$46,000,000 in civil penalties last year. This demonstrates that the DLE is essentially a revenue-neutral division within DEC. Currently, the DLE has an authorized strength of 342 positions. However, only 264 of these positions are filled. The DLE is currently recruiting for the upcoming academy class. Although there is no official start date, the DLE has been authorized to hire 45 new Environmental Conservation Police Officers. Unfortunately, we have already lost several candidates to the New York State Police and New York City Police Department.

There are 121 Forest Rangers in the DEC's Division of Forest Protection (DFP) who are supervised by 16 lieutenants and 11 captains. These Forest Rangers are responsible for patrolling over 4,000,000 acres of forests and conservation easements. This equates to approximately 35,000 acres per Forest Ranger. Unfortunately, lack of funding for the DFP has led to the establishment of the Forest Ranger Foundation, a non-profit organization dedicated to providing Forest Rangers with training, equipment, and support. Our Forest Rangers are saving lives and protecting our natural resources each and every day. They should not need a non-profit organization to provide them with basic training and equipment.

As you know, the State University of New York (SUNY) is a decentralized system comprised of 64 institutions. There are 29 separate University Police Departments (UPDs) across the State of New York. Unfortunately, there are no University Police Officers on our community college campuses. Calls for service at our community colleges are answered by security guards, peace officers, or local law enforcement officers who lack the specialized training and experience of University Police Officers. There is no centralized budget or oversight for the New York State University Police. Our police officers across the State of New York wear different uniforms, drive different cars, carry different guns, and wear different body-worn cameras. This system is extremely inefficient and fiscally irresponsible. The budgets for each UPD fall under the budget for the individual campus. As you can imagine, at a time when SUNY faces a fiscal crisis, it is difficult to ask a college or university to spend money on ammunition, ballistic vests, patrol vehicles, uniforms, and training. SUNY needs a centralized budget to alleviate the fiscal strain on our individual campuses, to ensure fiscal responsibility, and to promote public safety at our institutions of higher education.

The New York State Park Police are a division within the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP). In 2015, the PBA provided testimony to the legislature regarding the aging fleet of patrol vehicles in the Park Police. While the OPRHP has committed to purchasing approximately 30 patrol vehicles per year, the Park Police continue to operate vehicles with well over 100,000 miles on the odometer. Any legislative efforts to address this issue or similar issues are complicated by the fact that the Park Police budget is simply a line within the overall budget for OPRHP. The New York State Police assumed operational control of the Park Police in December of 2019. At the time, there were 247 Park Police Officers. However, in 2019, OPRHP stopped hiring Park Police Officers and no academies were held from 2019 until 2022. As a result, by 2022, only 179 Park Police Officers were left to patrol our 215 parks and historic sites. Thankfully, through the recruiting efforts of Colonel Doddana and the staff at OPRHP, there are now 205 Park Police Officers and we look forward to a class of over 50 new Park Police Officers this summer.

The most important issue impacting the members of the PBA is the lack of salary and pension parity with other police officers. Unless the State of New York takes immediate action to remedy the lack of salary and pension parity with other law enforcement agencies, SUNY, DEC, and OPRHP will be unable to retain our members. My members are required to work 5 more years and make significantly less money than

other law enforcement officers in New York State. This is not a question of whether the State of New York can afford to pay our police officers. The base salary for a New York State Trooper after one year of service is \$82,700. By contrast, the base salary of a police officer at SUNY, OPRHP, or DEC after 25 years of service is \$86,011. It is absolutely unacceptable that a trooper with 1 year of service makes roughly the same amount of money as a PBA member who is eligible for retirement.

As you know, Governor Kathy Hochul recently vetoed our 20-year retirement bill. Unfortunately, the PBA has lost 373 members during Hochul's administration. Only 121 of those members have retired. The overwhelming majority of the remaining 252 members have left the PBA for other law enforcement agencies. The inability of our agencies to compete with the salary and benefits of other agencies, even other state agencies, is costing the taxpayer's money. This attrition has a direct impact on the safety of our parks, our historic sites, our campuses, and our environment.

In conclusion, I would like to thank you for your continued support for my members. I would also like to encourage you to consider additional funding for each of the agencies my members work for, to consider individualized budget lines for our law enforcement agencies, and most importantly, to encourage you to include our 20-year pension in the New York State budget.