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2025 Joint Legislative Agriculture & Markets/ Parks & Recreation Hearing Testimony

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

**By: Officer Christopher Booker
Director of the New York State Park Police Officers
PBA of NYS Board Member
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Introduction

Good afternoon, Chairpersons, and members of the State Legislature. My name is Christopher Booker, and I am an officer with the New York State Park Police and a proud member of the Police Benevolent Association of New York State – the union representing approximately 1,200 specialized state police officers.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding the critical operational needs of the Park Police, which must be addressed in the Fiscal Year 2026 budget to ensure we can continue to protect and serve the tens of millions of people who visit our state's parks and natural resources each year and who bring billions of dollars in needed tourism revenue to our communities and state coffers.

The New York State Park Police play an essential role in safeguarding the 250 parks and historic sites that stretch across the state, from Niagara Falls to the Long Island Sound. To fulfill this mission effectively and meet the growing demands on our agency, I respectfully urge the Legislature to provide the following funding and resources:

Stand Alone Budget for the New York State Park Police

We respectfully request the New York State Park Police Chief assume command of his agency under the Commissioner of Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation and be given a separate budget independent from OPRHP. This goal will allow for more efficient spending and prevent reallocation of law enforcement funds within OPRHP for non-law enforcement purposes.

Increased Capital Funding for Inclusive and Safe Facilities

Many of our Park Police stations are outdated and inadequate for today's workforce. We operate out of old buildings repurposed from former hot dog stands, shared spaces with civilian maintenance employees, and aging infrastructure with potentially harmful conditions within. Furthermore, most are not properly equipped to handle the increase in female officers and have only one locker room to share with all the members of that station or zone. This past academy population was 1/3 female officers, meeting the governor's 30x30 initiative and underscores our need for upgraded facilities.

Enhanced Benefits to Support Recruitment and Retention

To remain competitive with other law enforcement agencies, the Park Police need increased benefits, including a 20-year retirement plan. This benefit is the standard in nearly every other law enforcement agency in New York State and is crucial to attracting and retaining the talented officers we need. Without retirement equity, we risk losing officers to other agencies, leaving our parks, natural resources, and communities vulnerable. We have an authorized strength of 387 Park Police Officers but currently only have 243 Park Police Officers within our agency.

A Stand-Alone Recruitment Budget

The Park Police must have a dedicated recruitment budget to ensure fully staffed academies. Recruitment has been a persistent challenge, and without targeted funding, we cannot attract enough qualified candidates to fill our ranks. A stand-alone recruitment budget will allow us to implement effective outreach campaigns and address staffing shortages that directly impact public safety.

Increased Funding for Specialized Park Police Vehicles and Equipment

The unique terrain we patrol requires vehicles tailored to our needs. We need funding to purchase patrol vehicles equipped with four-wheel drive, towing capabilities, and cargo space for rescue and specialized equipment. Additionally, funding for our specialized vehicles such as marine vessels, snowmobiles, all-terrain vehicles, and track equipped utility vehicles will allow our members to respond in the areas utilized by our patrons which are not easily accessible by motor vehicles. These vehicles and vessels are critical for ensuring the safety of park visitors and responding to emergencies in challenging environments, such as significant weather events relating to flooding, violent storms creating debris fields, and snowstorms.

Training and Abilities

In 2024, New York State Park Police responded to 51,388 calls and made 614 arrests. Those arrests were pursuant to a variety of calls not unlike other police departments and included domestic incidents, assaults, drugs, gun charges; along with driving, boating, and snowmobiling while intoxicated.

As unique and diverse as our parks are across this great state, so are the nature of our calls. We performed 123 rescues of injured and distressed park visitors. Those rescues were successful due to the experience and knowledge of our officers. Every member within a zone learns the unique training needed for their patrol area, which can include high angle rescues, swift-water rescue, hiking and land navigation in remote and inaccessible areas.

Park Police are also responsible for the safety and security of millions of patrons during live events that occur at our state parks throughout the year - mostly in the seasonable weather months. Our main three concert venues at ArtPark in Niagara Zone, Saratoga Performing Arts Center in the Saratoga Zone and The Jones Beach Theatre in the Long Island Zone were staffed and patrolled by our members for a total of 96 Live Nation concert events last year.

The Long Island Zone alone managed 132 large scale events in 2024 - at times involving more than a dozen agencies working in tandem. The Long Island Air Show on Memorial Day weekend featured the Navy's Blue Angels flight demonstration team, and in 2025 the Ryder Cup Golf event will be held at the famous Bethpage Black Course. This is but a small sampling of the events our state provides to its patrons in just 3 out of our 11 zones across the state. That's a lot of events, with millions of patrons, being protected by 243 very dedicated and highly trained community-focused police officers who also serve as ambassadors for the Empire State.

In closing, the New York State Park Police is in its 140th year of protecting our patrons, our properties, our surrounding communities, bodies of water and our state park lands. We are essential to the safety, preservation, and accessibility of New York's vast park system. By addressing these operational needs in the Fiscal Year 2026 budget, the Legislature can ensure that we remain equipped and prepared to meet the growing responsibilities of our agency. Thank you for your time and consideration of these critical priorities. I would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Respectfully,
Officer Christopher Booker

NYS Park Police

