



**New York State
Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services**

**Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Public Protection
February 13, 2025**

**Testimony by
Executive Deputy Commissioner Terence O’Leary**

Good morning. Thank you, Chair Krueger, Chair Pretlow, and distinguished members of the Joint Committee.

My name is Terry O’Leary. I am the Executive Deputy Commissioner of the Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services.

Thank you for the opportunity to discuss the 2025-2026 Executive Budget proposal, as well as the great work of the staff here at the Division. This budget reflects that the risks to the people of New York are accelerating and intensifying due to hazards that include climate change, domestic and international extremism, and cyberattacks.

This year’s Executive Budget proposes \$165.3 million in State operating funds for the Division, \$28 million in capital funding and \$8.89 billion in aid to localities, for a total budget of \$9.08 billion. Changes in this year’s Executive Budget include \$25 million in capital funding for a second round of the Volunteer Fire Infrastructure and Response Equipment (V-FIRE) grants, \$1.4 million to expand our Office of Counter Terrorism, and \$1 million dollars to develop and distribute a new media literacy guide for teachers, parents and students. These additional resources will not only build upon the Division’s prior efforts, but help to further



ensure New York is prepared for, and can respond to, any future disasters or emergencies.

Before discussing the great work of DHSES' employees, I would like to recognize the more than 200 emergency management staff members from eight State agencies who responded to help our neighbors in North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia and Florida following Hurricanes Helene and Milton in October and November.

Extreme weather events continue to directly impact New York, growing in both frequency and intensity. Last year, the State Emergency Operations Center was activated on seventeen occasions, ten of which were in response to severe weather. These included five lake effect snow events and instances of severe winter weather, eight days of widespread extreme heat in June, and flooding throughout the state caused by the remnants of Hurricane Beryl, Tropical Storm Debby, as well as intense rainfall in Suffolk County. Severe thunderstorms during the summer also led to a record-32 tornados throughout New York State, including the July 16 tornado that damaged downtown Rome.

After the extreme weather during the spring and summer, New York experienced drought conditions statewide in the fall, with portions of the Hudson Valley seeing no appreciable rainfall. These conditions led to significant wildfires occurring outside the traditional spring wildfire season; the most dangerous being the Jennings Creek wildfire in Orange County.

The response to the Jennings Creek wildfire was a testament to the State's preparedness for such an event, but also the commitment of New York State's volunteer fire departments.



When the Jennings Creek fire spread to edge of the Village of Greenwood Lake, the need for more than wildland firefighters became clear. While State Forest Rangers led the fight against the fire, given its encroachment on multiple neighborhoods in the vicinity of Greenwood Lake and Tuxedo, the support of structural firefighters was critical. Never failing to answer the call, the Division's Office of Fire Prevention and Control coordinated with 427 fire departments across the State who sent 1,325 firefighters, nearly all of them volunteers, to help extinguish the fire and protect the residents and property at risk.

These heroes should be commended for responding to their neighbors in a time of need, especially as structure fires continued to threaten the safety of New Yorkers. In 2024, 21,972 structure fires were reported in New York State, as well as nearly 400 lithium-ion battery-related fires. Unfortunately, as a result of these emergencies, there were 138 fire-related fatalities reported in 2024.

This exemplifies why the volunteer fire service remains at the core of public safety in so many communities and why it is critical we continue to support them. To this end, the Governor's budget includes an additional \$25 million to continue the incredibly popular V-FIRE program. In its inaugural year, the Division made 88 awards for the construction and renovation of fire operation facilities and for the purchase of needed equipment to strengthen volunteer fire departments and districts. This funding was supplemented by the Governor's commitment to helping recruitment and retention amongst the volunteer force by authorizing, for the very first time, a stipend payment for volunteers to complete necessary training. In its first year, the stipend program paid \$1.4 million to 1,365 volunteer firefighters.



Training first responders from all disciplines remains at the core of the Division's mission. This past year, nearly 84,000 people received training through the Division.

The Office of Fire Prevention and Control trained more than 52,000 firefighters and emergency responders, including 1,928 individuals who completed the Office's Lithium-Ion Battery safety course and 4,778 students who graduated from the state's Academy of Fire Science in Montour Falls. Additionally, the Office of Counter Terrorism delivered multiple types of training to more than 14,000 individuals, and the Office of Emergency Management trained another 8,000.

The Division is also proud to operate the State Preparedness Training Center in Oriskany – one of the nation's premier first responder training facilities. Last year, nearly 10,000 individuals received training at the SPTC. The capabilities of this facility to provide real-world, immersive training is second to none and I would like to offer everyone the opportunity to visit.

Cyber threats and attacks are also continuing to impact entities statewide, with a reported 400 percent increase in these incidents over the past seven years. In 2024, the Division's Cyber Incident Response Team responded to 71 separate incidents.

To guard against these threats, spread awareness and instill best practices, the team engages on multiple fronts. More than 10,000 State and local government professionals received anti-phishing trainings last year. Additionally, the Team conducted Cyber Capability workshops for more than 250 local leaders, 10 separate tabletop exercises and five cyber risk assessments.

Finally, I would be remiss to not mention the incredible work of the Division's Office of Disaster Recovery Programs. These dedicated public servants are responsible for the legwork to obtain federal



disaster declarations, in addition to administering all FEMA disaster funds. In 2024, New York secured four major disaster declarations for severe storms and flooding events, as well as nine U.S. Small Business Administration declarations offering low-interest loans to impacted communities. In November, Governor Hochul also secured New York's first ever FEMA Fire Management Assistance Grant Declaration to provide federal funding to cover some costs associated with efforts to combat the Jennings Creek Wildfire.

I'm proud of the work that's been done by our team to keep New Yorkers safe.

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before the Senate and Assembly and want to thank you for your ongoing support, which allows the Division to continue our important work.

I am happy to answer any questions you may have.

Thank you.