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2019 Joint Legislative Public Protection Hearing Testimony

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

By: Manuel Vilar

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

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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 35 year veteran NYS Park Police Sergeant who lives and works on Long Island.

I am here today to advocate for the merger of the NYS Park Police into the NYS Troopers. The NYS Park Police is a division within the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation and entrusted with the public safety of over 71 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.

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.

Currently, attrition is in the range of an unsustainable 53 percent, and staffing levels have for the past 19 years fluctuated between a low of 193 to a current staffing today of 265 which includes 45 Police recruits in the Park Police Academy. Despite NYS Civil Service's recommendation that there be 387 State Park Police Officers, NYS Parks has been unwilling to adequately staff the Police Force. Since 2000 State Park Police have graduated over 454 State Park Police Officers to only lose over 235 Officers to the Troopers, local municipal Police Departments and the private sector. 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. On Average, a State Trooper earns between 30,000 dollars to 45,000 dollars more per year, has a 20-year pension plan and $\frac{3}{4}$ disability should a member become injured and unable to return to full duty.

Despite the best efforts of the men and women of the State Park Police which is compounded by the constant turnover of personnel, New York State is on the verge of a public safety emergency. The 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. To make things worse, GOER has purposely instituted a negotiation strategy to keep the Park Police salary low as a hedge against the much larger 30,000 State Corrections Office. We also have a 25-year pension unlike State Troopers and local municipal Police Officers who have 20-year retirement plans.

Many State Parks go unpatrolled or seldom see a State Park Police Officer during the busiest time of year. During the non-summer months on holidays when parks are at their busiest to save funds, staffing is further reduced, and Police Officers are mandated to stay home. During the recent Snow State of Emergency Park Police Officers were reassigned across the state and required to pay for their room and board. There is no doubt in my mind patrons have been adversely affected and, in some instances, perished.

State Parks have had some form of law enforcement starting with NYS 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 calling for an immediate administrative takeover of the State Park Police by the Division of State Police as was done in the 1990's, second we are requesting that the NYS Legislature pass a NYS Trooper Park Police Merger Bill that we have submitted.

The Merger legislation that 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. The 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 speak before you
today and will now take your questions.