

New York State Lifeguard Corps.

Testimony

**to the
Senate Finance Committee
and
Assembly Ways and Means Committee
on
Public Protection**

January 30, 2012

Prepared by:

Bruce Meirowitz, President New York State Lifeguard Corps.

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Budget Cuts - The Effect on Public Safety, Staffing, and Waterfront Accessibility

Senator DeFrancisco, Assemblyman Farrell, honorable members of the Senate Finance and Assembly Ways and Means Committees and distinguished staff, I am Bruce Meirowitz, President of the New York State Lifeguard Corps. (NYSLC). The NYSLC is affiliated with the United University Professions (UUP), NYSUT, and AFT.

My testimony today represents the concerns of nearly 1,087 lifeguards working for the New York State Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and the Department of Environmental Conservation. We also represent year-round part-time lifeguards employed by the Department of Health and the Office for People with Developmental Disabilities (formerly OMRDD).

Thank you for convening this public hearing and for the opportunity to testify today. My testimony will address the effects that recent budget cuts to our state parks have had on public safety, staffing, and waterfront accessibility.

My members protect New York's beaches, bays, lakes, rivers and pools from Montauk Point to Niagara Falls and from Staten Island to the Thousand Islands. Our job as first responders is to protect and preserve human life. Last year, NYSLC's lifeguards participated in thousands of rescues, hundreds of aided cases and protected hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers.

In recent years, we have seen the closing of portions of parks, deterioration of pools, and the loss of waterfront. On Long Island, the East Bath House Pool, the Hechsher Pool, and the West End Beaches have all closed. These facilities were closed due to a lack of state funding. The facilities at those parks that have remained open are decaying and are in a general state of disrepair. At the same time, the utilization of our state parks and facilities by the public has increased tremendously. Due to the economy, many New Yorkers are no longer able to afford to take a vacation and instead are taking "staycations." That is to say, people are staying closer to home and many are utilizing our state's parks for their recreation.

The Governor has proposed to increase funding for capital improvements and critical maintenance for our state parks. We urge you to support this proposal and to include this funding in the final enacted state budget. Without this funding our state facilities will continue to deteriorate and become unsafe for public use. Capital improvements and maintenance of our state parks must be a priority. The general poor condition of many of our state facilities coupled with the loss of waterfront and higher public utilization rates has made my members' job of protecting the public increasingly more difficult.

This leads me to another issue of great concern for my members. Notwithstanding, the fact that my members' jobs have become more difficult, New York state has failed to reach a fair collective bargaining agreement with the New York State Lifeguard Corps. In fact, we have been without a contract for 10 years. This puts our base pay below that of many neighboring municipalities and retail businesses. The Parks Department's ability to attract qualified lifeguards has been compromised by the failure of the state to negotiate a fair contract. I urge you to support my members in their pursuit of reaching a fair contract with the state this year; it is long overdue.

In conclusion, I have been an ocean rescue lifeguard and New York state employee for 43 years. I have many years of experience and expertise in water safety issues. The Lifeguard Corps. is more than a union or an association, it is a group that shares a common bond to protect the public. Again, I urge you to please support the Executive Budget recommendation to increase capital funding to improve the quality of our New York state parks.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you on behalf of the fine men and woman of the New York State Lifeguard Corps.