



NEW YORK STATE LEGISLATURE

January 18, 2022

The Honorable Erik Kulleseid
Commissioner
NYS Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation
Albany, NY, 12238

The Honorable Kathy Hochul
Governor
The State of New York
The Capitol
Albany, NY 12224

Dear Governor Hochul and Commissioner Kulleseid,

We write to call for the end of the State Park Police Officer hiring freeze that has been in place for almost three years. The lack of these police officers within New York State Parks regrettably coincides with the COVID-19 pandemic - where park attendance is the highest it has ever been. State parks have, and continue to be, a haven for all New Yorkers and citizens across the United States who can exercise and enjoy the beauty, history, and culture our state has to offer. Unfortunately, this high attendance is not without consequence. Without a fully staffed Park Police force in place – one that can proactively police and respond to emergencies in real time – we believe that the level and safety of the millions of visitors to our park system will continue to be at stake.

Furthermore, we ask that the memorandum issued by former Governor Cuomo on December 3, 2019, which effectively placed the Park Police under the operational command of the New York State Police, be rescinded and that the State Park Police be reinstated as a fully funded and independent entity. This order sought to handicap the State Park Police by transferring qualified park police officers to the State Police. It is also our understanding that since 2019, in addition to the hiring freeze, the Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation has barred the transferring of officers, halted promotions, and has not purchased the necessary equipment commensurate with the New York Park system and its visitors.

The skills, training, and necessity of these park police officers should not go unnoticed. In the Niagara region, which covers all the state parks in Niagara and Erie counties, State Park Police Officers responded to 136 mental health calls (mostly at Niagara Falls) in 2021. This led to 33 actual investigations and four suicides according to the Police Benevolent Association of New York State. Simply put, proactive policing of these park facilities requires more State Park Officers.

We know that both of you are committed to ensuring the highest level of safety for visitors in our park system. Now, in 2022, is the right time to lift this hiring freeze to ensure that the park system has a fully staffed and robust State Park Police force that is equipped to manage the challenges in the years to come.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,

Handwritten signature of Robert G. Ort in black ink, featuring a stylized 'R' and 'O'.

Robert G. Ort
NYS Senate Minority Leader

Handwritten signature of Angelo Morinello in black ink, written in a cursive style.

Angelo Morinello
Assemblymember