



RHODE ISLAND ENVIRONMENTAL POLICE OFFICERS ASSOCIATION

April 25, 2024

RI HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE
RI STATE HOUSE
PROVIDENCE, RI

CHAIRMAN MARVIN ABNEY
HONORABLE HOUSE FINANCE COMMITTEE MEMBERS

My Name is Sergeant Harold Guise. I have worked in state service for 10 years and serve as the President of the Rhode Island Environmental Police Officers Association. I am writing on behalf of the officers that I am proud to work with every day.

I find myself almost daily trying to describe what we do when presented with the question "so do you just check fishing licenses all day? This has been a question that has echoed throughout my career and so many others before me. I think that when people think of what we do, if they ever have that thought, often believe our average day consists of walking down streams chatting with trout fisherman and rescuing orphaned animals. While we do those tasks occasionally, that idealistic picture of what a "Game Warden" is or was, is far removed from our current reality.

Twice in recent years I have found myself in the woods flanked by fellow officers from other agencies like State Police or Lincoln Police Department attempting to track down armed suspects in our state parks. One suspect had taken a shot at another person one hundred yards from my location while I stood on the crowded beach at Lincoln Woods. The other had sexually assaulted a woman at gunpoint and was hiding in the woods all day during a busy summer weekend. The parks were full of families and people enjoying the beauty that DEM properties offer. Yet, there I was with my patrol rifle looking for someone that had the potential to do real harm to the public. These are the situations that do not make the news and are only visible to those directly involved.

A little over a year ago I responded to Beavertail State Park for an attempted suicide. The vehicle was empty but there were obvious signs of what had happened. By the time it was dark we still had not found the individual. A drone operator located him down a 40ft cliff at the water's edge. At the time we believed the subject was armed and concluded it was not safe to send Fire department personnel down the 40 ft cliff to render aid. Committed to the preservation of life and with an unwavering sense of duty two Environmental Police officers that are a part of our 6-person Rescue Swimmer Team entered the near-freezing water in complete darkness. They executed this dangerous rescue for two reasons, to render aid to someone that was in distress and to protect other first responders on scene from potential danger.

My question today is whether it is reasonable to ask someone that is in their mid-60's to perform those tasks safely and effectively. Is it safe for someone in their mid-60's to perform even "routine" tasks we do every day, such as boarding commercial fishing draggers 20 miles offshore or confronting armed hunters in challenging terrain miles away from any road or backup. In our current retirement system, I will be asked to

perform these duties well into my sixties. Younger officers will be required to work as a Police officer in this state for 37 years. I can only hope that at age 64 or 65 I will be able to serve the people of Rhode Island with the same quality that I do today, but I am not sure that will be true. Think carefully about your own family picnicking in a state park, or someone you know at their worst and in need of police assistance and choose the age of the responder that you want responding to that call. Every other police department in the state of Rhode Island has answered this question of is it responsible to expect officers to patrol into their 60's with a resounding 'No'. No, for the safety of the individual officer. No, for the safety of the other officers in the department. No, for the safety of the public, we as police officers so willingly place themselves in harm's way to protect and serve.

We attend the Rhode Island Municipal Police Academy along side the other 39 cities and towns as well as a few other agencies. We graduate as certified police officers that are able to work in any city or town and yet we chose to work for DEM. In the past few years Environmental Police officers, with the support of Chief Hoxsie, have taken an increasingly dedicated role to supporting that academy. We have had three officers in the last three years serve as Class Training Officers committed to all 22 weeks of the academy. I myself am currently assigned as the lead firearms instructor for the municipal academy. In that role I have supervised a staff of 15 active police officers and trained the two largest classes to have ever graduated. Those 15 officers, and the 119 recruits, will all be eligible for retirement before me. If I was to transfer to almost any police department in the state and start my career over, I would be eligible for retirement earlier than if I stay with Environmental Police.

I am writing today because I not only care about the health, welfare and quality of life of my coworkers, but also because I see the value in the services and protection we provide for the people and resources of Rhode Island. I can tell you that without change, the quality of that service, the safety of the public, the safety of my fellow officers, and the protection of our natural resources are at grave risk.

Respectfully,

Harold Guise
RIEPOA President

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