

OHIO

Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group

REPORT

August 2026

An examination of local emergency response to Ohio's 76 state parks and the role of local and state first responders in maintaining safety.

"Every year, tens of millions of people visit Ohio's 76 state parks. By examining resources available for our parks' first responders, we can better ensure that necessary public safety services are readily available when needed."

— Mike DeWine, Governor of Ohio



MIKE DEWINE
GOVERNOR OF OHIO



Department of
Public Safety



Department of
Natural Resources

Letter from the Governor



Governor DeWine hiking with his family at John Bryan State Park



Dear Fellow Ohioans,

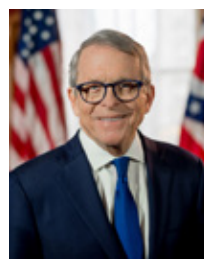
Every year, tens of millions of visitors from Ohio and across the country visit our 76 spectacular state parks, found in every corner of our state. Recently recognized as the No. 1 state park system in the nation, we take pride in our state parks and work hard to ensure that visitors can enjoy Ohio's natural beauty.

We know that Ohio's state parks are safe, but as with any forested area, body of water, or nature trail, there are always risks associated with exploring the great outdoors. That's why local emergency management professionals, local law enforcement officers, and natural resource officers work together to protect our parks and answer the call when someone needs help. I commend these first responders for their dedication to our state parks and their commitment to serving the public.

In October 2025, I created the Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group to examine our state parks' strong public safety practices and make recommendations on how we can make them even stronger. I asked the group to thoroughly review all aspects related to safety in our state parks – from fire and emergency management service responses to police response times and the role of local

tourism associations. I also asked them to think about how the state can do more to support local governments with state parks in their jurisdictions, given that the popularity of Ohio's state parks can result in more emergency calls and higher expenses for surrounding communities. This report contains the group's recommendations.

I am grateful to each member of the Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group, and I thank them for volunteering their time to evaluate the issues impacting the safety of our guests at Ohio's state parks. The recommendations in this report will serve as an important guide to help ensure that state and local first responders can access resources to provide public safety services to Ohio's state parks.



Very Respectfully Yours,

A handwritten signature of Mike DeWine in black ink.

Mike DeWine
Governor

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Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group Members



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Pat Brown, Lt. Colonel, ODNR Division of Parks & Watercraft

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Melinda Huntley, Executive Director, Ohio Travel Association

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Executive Summary



Van Buren State Park

Ohio's state parks are vital for the state. They are key indicators and drivers of local economies, provide habitat for our native plant and wildlife species to thrive, and offer unforgettable experiences for visitors.

In October 2025, Governor Mike DeWine convened the Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group to review policies, procedures, data, and expert testimony regarding local emergency response to Ohio's 76 state parks. The group was charged with examining all facets of emergency services and providing recommendations on areas where improvements can be made. With this mission in mind, the group convened five times beginning in November 2025 with the final meeting held in March 2026.

The working group included individuals from the tourism industry, government agencies, and the emergency service fields. Group members spoke with subject matter experts and streamed all meetings online to ensure transparency.

Although working group members found that state and local authorities already have strong partnerships in place to effectively provide public safety services in Ohio's state parks, they developed seven recommendations to build upon current efforts. The group also acknowledged that increased funding to hire additional ODNR officers would be the most straightforward method to bolster public safety services in Ohio's state parks.

Ohio State Parks By The Numbers



76
STATE
PARKS



9,000+
CAMPSITES



500+
CABINS



10
STATE PARK
LODGES



1,200+
MILES OF
TRAILS



7,000
EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS
per year

1 Million+
OVERNIGHT VISITS



NAMED

#1
STATE
PARKS
IN THE
NATION

in 2025

Ohio Natural Resources Officers By The Numbers



188
CURRENT
STAFF



1,000+
PATROL HOURS
each annually



43,000+
INCIDENTS
RESPONDED TO



**RESPONDS TO
ISSUES AT**
State Parks, State
Nature Preserves,
and State Forests

Recommendations

- 1** The Ohio Department of Public Safety's Office of Criminal Justice Services should create a grant program to aid local agencies that assist in responding to emergencies at Ohio's state parks.
- 2** The Ohio Emergency Management Agency should include on its website information regarding the process to request mutual aid through Ohio's Emergency Response System.
- 3** The Ohio Department of Natural Resources should explore the potential of a standardized public safety fee for large, third-party events held at Ohio state parks.
- 4** Ohio should establish a Drones as First Responders pilot program tailored specifically to local law enforcement agencies that provide support to state parks.
- 5** The Ohio Emergency Management Agency should work with county emergency management agencies to incorporate exercises and drills focused on state parks into joint training exercises with local law enforcement.
- 6** The Ohio Travel Association should work with county convention and visitors bureaus to establish a toolkit aimed at supporting local law enforcement.
- 7** The Ohio General Assembly should create legislation mandating that Ohio counties publish an annual report regarding compliance with lodging tax payments.

Indian Lake State Park



emergencies when local mutual aid capabilities have been exhausted. While most local law enforcement agencies are aware of the process to access mutual aid through ERS, the Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group recommends that the Ohio Emergency Management Agency add this information to its public website. The information should be substantially similar to ERS information on the Ohio Fire Chiefs' Association website.

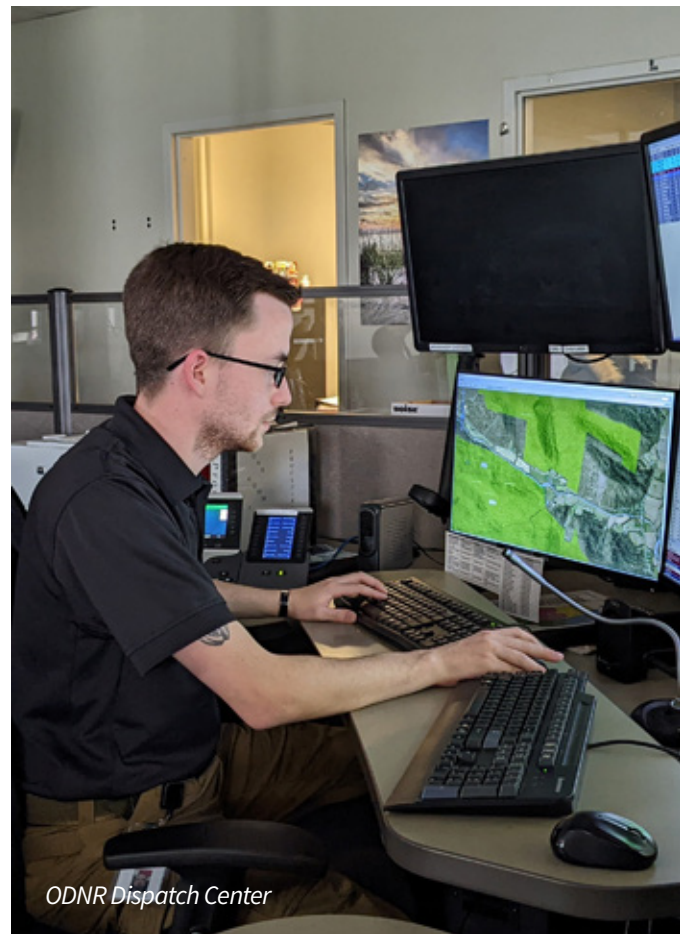
Working group members also recommend that local agencies have multiple people familiar with the process to obtain additional resources when local capabilities are depleted.

1 The Ohio Department of Public Safety's Office of Criminal Justice Services should create a grant program to aid local agencies that assist in responding to emergencies at Ohio's state parks.

The Ohio Department of Natural Resources employs nearly 200 natural resources officers who patrol Ohio's state parks, forests, waterways, and natural areas. Given the large number and vast size of these properties throughout the state, assistance from local first responders is essential.

While local agencies are willing partners in this effort, servicing state properties can strain local jurisdictions' already stretched resources. Members of the Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group recommend that the Ohio Department of Public Safety's Office of Criminal Justice Services (OCJS) create a grant program to support local agencies that regularly provide public safety services in state parks.

OCJS should create grant guidelines that give local agencies flexibility to use funds in a manner that best serves the unique circumstances of individual local agencies and the state properties in their jurisdictions. This could include grants to fund local officers dedicated to state parks, special duty or overtime law enforcement details during peak tourism seasons, or specialized equipment and technology for responding to state park emergencies.



2 The Ohio Emergency Management Agency (Ohio EMA) should include on its website information regarding the process to request mutual aid through Ohio's Emergency Response System.

Ohio Revised Code sections 5502.29 and 5502.41 establish frameworks for mutual aid between state and local emergency response agencies across the state. Since 2002, the State Emergency Response System (ERS) has been used to provide jurisdictions with a method to quickly summon additional resources to handle major

3 The Ohio Department of Natural Resources should explore the potential of a standardized public safety fee for large, third-party events held at Ohio state parks.

Many Ohio state parks offer large, open spaces that accommodate large-scale events like triathlons and festivals that attract thousands of people and necessitate support from state and local law enforcement. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) does not currently impose public safety fees for all large events;

instead, fees are considered for events on a case-by-case basis.

Because large-scale events divert law enforcement from typical duties, **members of the Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group recommend that ODNR consider implementing a standardized public safety fee for large, third-party events held at Ohio state parks.** A consistent fee could help cover the cost of additional officers, required overtime, and needed equipment to ensure the safety of those attending large events within Ohio's state parks.

4 Ohio should establish a Drones as First Responders pilot program tailored specifically to local law enforcement agencies that provide support to state parks.

Ohio House Bill 96, signed into law by Governor DeWine on June 30, 2025, established a pilot program within the Ohio Department of Transportation to support the use of drones by law enforcement, fire departments, and emergency medical services. The program uses pre-positioned or immediately dispatchable drones to reach emergency scenes before ground units, providing real-time situational awareness via live video feeds.

Due to the unique circumstances faced by local law enforcement agencies that respond to Ohio's state parks, such as rugged terrain and remote locations, members of the Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group believe that an additional drone program should be developed to focus on these unique needs. **The Ohio Emergency Management Agency and Ohio Homeland Security offices should work in partnership with the Ohio Department of Transportation to establish a Drones as First Responders pilot program tailored specifically to local law enforcement agencies that provide support to state parks.**

Creating a customized drone program for agencies serving state parks will help first responders assess how drone technology can improve situational awareness in park settings, reduce emergency response time to hard-to-reach areas, and enhance the safety of park visitors and first responders.



Drone Pilot Training



Natural Resource Officer Cadet water training

5 The Ohio Emergency Management Agency should work with county emergency management agencies to incorporate exercises and drills focused on state parks into joint training exercises with local law enforcement.

While state and local law enforcement agencies periodically partner on joint exercises and drills to practice emergency response strategies, working group members found that state park properties are not typically part of these drills. Given the unique complexities of responding to emergencies in state parks, training for these specific scenarios is paramount and should be included in regular training drills. **The Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group recommends that the Ohio Emergency Management Agency work with local emergency management agencies in counties with state parks to incorporate exercises and drills into joint training exercises with local law enforcement.** The exercises should include law enforcement, fire, and emergency response scenarios, search and rescue drills, and communication exercises.

6 The Ohio Travel Association should work with county convention and visitors bureaus to establish a toolkit aimed at supporting local law enforcement.

Ohio Revised Code 5739.09, which establishes the laws for collecting lodging taxes, allows a portion of the tax revenues to be used by local convention and visitors bureaus (CVB) to promote and market local tourism activities. This law was updated in the most recent operating budget to allow CVBs in counties with less than 100,000 residents and more than \$500,000 in yearly lodging tax revenue to contribute some of their funding to support local public safety services.

The Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group recommends that the Ohio Travel Association work with CVBs to create a toolkit to assist qualifying boards in exploring ways to support local law enforcement. The toolkit should include information on the Hocking Hills Tourism Association's Impact Emergency Services (TIES) Grant Program, which was created as a result of the updated law. The TIES program specifically supports the work of law enforcement to manage the seasonal surge of visitors to the Hocking Hills region and may serve as a model for other counties facing similar visitor pressures.

7 The Ohio General Assembly should create legislation mandating that Ohio counties publish an annual report regarding compliance with lodging tax payments.

Ohio Revised Code 5739.09 permits local officials to implement and collect a lodging tax paid by operators of hotels and other facilities that provide lodging accommodations. The lodging tax percentage varies by community, and there is no standard practice for the collection of this tax revenue; townships and counties collect funds according to their own process and schedule, typically on a quarterly or monthly basis. Due to minimal state oversight of the collection process, working group members voiced concerns over whether all entities were paying the full amount of taxes due. **The Public Safety in Ohio State Parks Working Group recommends that the Ohio the Ohio General Assembly create an annual report for Ohio counties regarding compliance with lodging tax payments.** By ensuring that lodging taxes are remitted properly, counties and townships can reliably access the funds they need to support their local economies and continue to provide emergency services in their communities and any nearby state parks.





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