



Inclusion of Department of Conservation and Recreation Conservation Officers in the Virginia Law Enforcement Retirement System

This legislative action would add conservation officers of the Department of Conservation and Recreation (DCR) as members of the Virginia Law Officers' Retirement System (VaLORS). Virginia State Park Conservation Officers would accrue retirement benefits under the Virginia Law Officers' Retirement System for creditable service on or after July 1, 2019.

Virginia State Park Conservation Officers obtain their 20-week Basic Law Enforcement Training at the Cardinal Criminal Justice Academy in Salem, Virginia. They train alongside officers from 34 other jurisdictions including Roanoke City, Blacksburg, Radford, Christiansburg, Virginia Tech, and numerous other county sheriff departments. Upon completion of the basic academy, they participate in 10 weeks of Field Training with the Division of State Parks.

In 2008 the JLARC report titled “Review of State Employee Total Compensation” supported the inclusion of Conservation Officers of the Department of Conservation and Recreation. Conservation officers are expected to protect and preserve the lives and property of our citizens and their guests while also protecting the unique and irreplaceable natural and cultural resources of the Commonwealth. The Department of Conservation and Recreation is responsible for the management of 104 sites and 125,252 acres representing 43 state park sites (over 73,000 acres) and 62 natural area sites (55,352 acres). Day use and overnight visitation to state parks was over 10 million visits in 2018.

Recognized by The General Assembly as law enforcement officers of the Department of Conservation and Recreation.

§9.1-101 The Code of Virginia defines DCR’s Conservation Officers as “law-enforcement officers.”

§10.1-117 Establishes DCR’s Conservation Officers as law enforcement officers.

The General Assembly also recognized the enhanced threat to DCR’s officers and in doing so have included them among those officers for which violent acts against them have enhanced penalties.

§18.2-57 in which assault on a law enforcement officer has an enhanced penalty;

§18.2-51.1 in which the malicious wounding of a law enforcement officer carries an enhanced penalty;

§18.2-31 in which the murder of a DCR officer is considered a capital offense.

§9.1-400 Due to the inherent risk of these duties, DCR Officers are included in the Line of Duty Act.

§65.2-402.1 Provides protection as officers in which their death or disability from blood borne pathogens is job related.

§18.2-308 Includes DCR officers in the list of recognized retired officers to allow conceal carry

In July of 2018, State Park Conservation Officers assigned to the Breaks Interstate Park were included into Virginia Retirement System and are provided hazardous duty benefits equivalent to those provided for State Police Officers as set out in Section 51.1-138 of the Code of Virginia. These officers receive their authority through the same code section as other State Park Conservation Officers and in addition attend the same training as State Park Conservation Officers.

DCR is an accredited law enforcement agency by the Virginia Law Enforcement Professional Standards Commission (VLEPSC). DCR and ABC are the only state-wide law enforcement agencies so accredited and it should be noted that ABC is already covered by VaLORS. (The Capitol Police and the campus police forces of several University and Colleges are also accredited agencies. The Department of State Police is accredited by CALEA, the Commission on Accreditation for Law Enforcement.)

Inclusion of its officers in VaLORS will better enable the Department of Conservation and Recreation to recruit and retain Conservation Officers and reduce the loss of highly trained personnel to law enforcement agencies that are able to provide the enhanced retirement benefits that allow an officer to retire with fewer years of service due to the enhanced risk and physical demands required of the position.