



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Patty Ritchie

## Ritchie Bill Boosts Wilderness Rescue Groups

PATTY RITCHIE June 12, 2012

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### **Final Passage: Governor's Signature Would Set Standards 30 Years in the Making**

The State Senate gave final legislative approval today to a bill, sponsored by Senator Patty Ritchie, that gives official state recognition to volunteer “search and rescue” groups like those that help save countless lives of lost hikers, hunters and others in the Adirondacks and other vast wilderness areas of Upstate. The bill, S.3552, which now goes to Governor Cuomo for his signature, caps a 30-year effort by state Forest Rangers, volunteer groups and local communities to establish standards for training and safety of volunteers, which supporters believe will help lead to more successful rescue operations.

“More than 26 search and rescue groups across the state include individuals who put their lives at risk every year, enduring rough terrain, bad weather and unseen hazards—where cell phones don’t work, roads are few, and injuries are common—to help hikers, hunters and others who become lost or disoriented in the woods and wilderness areas of our state,” said Senator Ritchie.

“This bill will help ensure that rescuers can get proper training and recognition to continue to successfully complete their difficult tasks, and lead to even more lives saved in the future,” Senator Ritchie said.

The bill previously passed unanimously in the Senate in 2011, and in the Assembly, where it is sponsored by Assemblyman Bill Magee, for this first time earlier this week.

More than 300 visitors to the Adirondack Park are lost or injured while wandering in its thick forests each year, requiring Forest Ranger and volunteer efforts to locate and rescue them. And there are currently nine outstanding missing persons cases dating back to 1971.

Senator Ritchie's bill:

- officially recognizes volunteer wilderness/inland Search and Rescue groups, and allows (but doesn't require) local governments to use the groups in rescue operations;
- directs the state Department of Environmental Conservation to design specific training that would lead to official credentialing of search and rescue volunteers. The training would be designed to reduce risk and injury to volunteers, as much as helping to ensure more successful search outcomes (not unlike training that's required for firefighters and other ;
- protects local communities who use search and rescue groups from certain lawsuits and damages that could arise from rescue operations.

The bill next goes to the Governor for approval.