



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Susan Serino

## SERINO BRINGS LAWMAKERS TOGETHER TO PUT SPOTLIGHT ON LYME AND TICK-BORNE DISEASES

SUSAN SERINO March 2, 2021

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HYDE PARK, NY— With this year's Executive Budget Proposal including no funding expressly dedicated to combating the spread of Lyme and tick-borne diseases (TBDs), (TBDs), Senator Sue Serino today brought lawmakers, researchers, and advocates from across the state together at a virtual press conference to put a spotlight on the need to invest in research, education and prevention initiatives. The coalition is asking the state to commit at least \$1.5 million to the cause in the final enacted State Budget.

At the event, Serino pointed to the fact that after years of fighting for acknowledgement, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has recently updated its reporting measures and now estimates that approximately 476,000 Americans are diagnosed and treated for Lyme disease each year, a significant increase from their previous estimate of approximately 300,000. Serino argues that with New Yorkers spending even more time outdoors, and with Lyme and TBDs often resulting in symptoms similar to COVID-19, now is not the time for the state to go backwards in its fight.

*“Funding for public health has never been more important, and that includes taking the necessary steps to protect New Yorkers against Lyme and tick-borne diseases,” said Senator Sue Serino. “Despite the fact that New York has made significant progress in raising critical awareness for Lyme and TBDs, yet again, the Governor has not included any funding to continue this critically important work in his Executive Budget Proposal, threatening to undo any progress that has been made. With New Yorkers hitting our parks and trails in droves and a need to prevent exposure to any illnesses that may have similar symptoms to COVID-19, now more than ever, we need to be doing all that we can to ensure that combating the spread of Lyme and TBDs remains a top priority.”*

Despite widespread bi-partisan support for efforts aimed at tackling ticks, over the past two years, funding for Lyme and tick-borne diseases has been substantially reduced. In 2018, Senator Serino was successful in securing an unprecedented \$1 million Legislative add in the final State Budget to help support research, education and prevention initiatives. In both 2019 and 2020, funding for these programs was reduced to only \$250,000. This year, the Governor’s Executive Budget Proposal even eliminates the small \$69,400 allotment that is typically included “for services and expenses of research and prevention, and detection of Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses.”

Following the press conference, event participants had the opportunity to hear from patient advocates and researchers who provided an update on projects that have been funded in part through past state budgets and painted a picture of the status of Lyme and TBDs in the state today. With many new Legislators elected to both the Senate and Assembly, the event

served as an opportunity for lawmakers and their staff to hear first-hand about the innovative work being done all across New York and why it is critically important for the state not to undo the progress it has made in combating Lyme and TBDs.

Panelists included:

- Holly Ahern, MS – Associate Professor of Microbiology at SUNY Adirondack and Vice President of the Lyme Action Network;
- Brian Leydet, PhD – Assistant Professor of Environmental & Forest Biology at SUNY College of Environmental Science & Forestry;
- Joyce Tomaselli - Community Horticulture Resource Educator at Cornell Cooperative Extension Dutchess County; and
- Jill Auerbach – Patient Advocate & Chairperson of the Hudson Valley Lyme Disease Association

**Brian Leydet, Assistant Professor of Environmental & Forest Biology at SUNY College of Environmental Science & Forestry said,** *“Ticks and their diseases pose significant public health threats to citizens and visitors of New York State. New York State funding supports ongoing critical research helping to understand why ticks and their diseases are invading every corner of our state and what we can do to slow, stop, and eventually reverse this spread.”*

**Holly Ahern, Associate Professor of Microbiology at SUNY Adirondack and Vice President of the Lyme Action Network said,** *“The ‘long-hauler’ phenomenon that is making headlines with Covid patients is very similar to what many Lyme disease patients have been experiencing for a long time. Patients with ‘long-hauler’ Lyme disease face discrimination that is deeply institutionalized – in medical practice and in public health policies. Insurance companies exploit the existing stalemate to avoid reimbursement for treatments such as IV antibiotics.”*

**Jill Auerbach, Patient Advocate and Chairperson of the Hudson Valley Lyme Disease Association said,** *“While COVID has taken hold of everyone, the ticks and the pathogens continue to increase and spread. NYS has one of the highest incidents of Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease. The total costs in NYS are*

*approximately \$1 billion per year. It is incomprehensible that state funding is minimal at best when we have so many research resources at our disposal in NYS. It's penny wise and pound foolish! We have a huge environmental problem. Until that is tackled these will continue to increase and spread like wildfire. It's time for NYS to protect our citizens by funding research NOW!"*

*"New York State has one of the highest rates of Lyme Disease in the nation, which is why the \$1.5 million in budget funding we are requesting should be a top priority," said Senator George Borrello, 57<sup>th</sup> Senate District. "With debilitating and often long-lasting symptoms, this horrific disease can take a terrible toll on the physical and emotional health of affected individuals and their quality of life. It is a particular concern in my district because of the prevalence of our parks, forests and outdoor attractions. I appreciate Senator Serino's leadership on this issue and join her call for stronger state action."*

*Senator Pam Helming said, "Lyme and other tick-borne diseases continue to be a prevalent threat across our region and around our state. Since taking office as State Senator, I have proudly advocated on behalf of those suffering from these illnesses as well as the medical and public health professionals working with them. Thank you to Senator Sue Serino for hosting this important discussion and for being a tireless advocate on these issues."*

*"The fight against Lyme disease and tick-borne illness cannot be relegated to a second-tier issue, even in the time of COVID-19. Lyme disease and tick-borne illnesses are a public health crisis, one that must command our time, attention, and resources. Lyme disease has wreaked havoc on far too many New Yorkers' lives, negatively impacting their personal health, causing chronic issues. The CDC has reported that nearly 500,000 individuals – likely many more because it often goes unreported – are diagnosed and treated for Lyme annually. It's vital that New York State continue making real progress toward combatting this public health crisis and that Lyme disease prevention in the State Budget be treated as a priority. Priorities, like Lyme disease funding, not politics, must be our focus," Senator Daphne Jordan (R,C,I-Halfmoon) said.*

*"The Covid-19 pandemic has led more folks to use our parks and trails and other outdoor venues," said Senator Mike Martucci, (Hudson Valley/Catskills) "The last thing we can afford to do is to go backward on funding for Lyme disease. I am proud to stand with my colleague Senator Serino in advocating for \$1.5 million in this year's budget to support the health and safety of my constituents."*

*Senator Tom O'Mara said, "Now is no time to ignore funding for critical public health responses. Thousands upon thousands of New Yorkers suffer from Lyme Disease annually, yet Governor Cuomo's proposed budget fails to offer a penny of funding to help combat the spread of this disease. That's unacceptable and this Legislature must act in the absence of executive leadership. Important actions over the past several years have broadened the state's overall response to the spread of Lyme and other tick-*

borne diseases. Nevertheless, much more needs to be done, particularly in the areas of reporting, testing and treatment, and education and awareness."

**Senator Peter Oberacker, a member of the Senate Health Committee, said,** "We know more today than ever before about Lyme and other tick-borne diseases (TBDs). As these debilitating ailments spread to new parts of the state, it is vital that we continue to move forward with education, prevention, and treatment efforts. New York is at a critical juncture and absent state funding, the progress we have made is at stake. We need to intensify our efforts - helping individuals who suffer from Lyme while stopping new cases before they start. I commended Senator Serino for her ongoing efforts and stand with her in calling for the resources necessary to support the fight against Lyme."

"Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses continue to pose serious health concerns for residents on the East End of Long Island with countless families being impacted by these insidious diseases," **said Senator Anthony Palumbo.** "I applaud my colleague Senator Sue Serino for her advocacy on this important issue and proudly join her efforts to include \$1.5 million in this year's State Budget to provide funding for education, research and prevention to help combat tick-borne illnesses throughout New York State."

**Senator Alexis Weik said,** "Now, more than ever, it is critical to ensure funding is provided in this year's Budget for Lyme and tick borne disease research, education, and prevention. Over the past year, our State Parks have seen record numbers of visitors as people who have been stuck inside during the pandemic, find ways to get outside safely. Long Island is home to some of the highest rates of Lyme and tick borne disease in the State so it is unfortunate that the Governor cut all funding to these vital programs in his Executive Budget. I proudly join Senator Serino and my Senate colleagues in requesting \$1.5 million be secured in the Enacted Budget.

"As a longtime advocate for increasing funding for research, education, and prevention initiatives to combat Lyme and other tick-borne diseases (TBDs) in New York State, I am always pleased to see bipartisan support for this critical public health issue.. As I have in past years, I have asked that **at least \$1,000,000** in funding be allocated for these initiatives to be included in this year's budget. It's time for New York State to take a leadership role in the battle against Lyme and tick-borne illnesses, " **said Assemblymember Didi Barrett.**

**Assemblyman Colin J. Schmitt stated,** "Lyme and tick-borne diseases continue to have a profound impact on residents across the Hudson Valley and across the state. I proudly support Senator Sue Serino's bipartisan effort to have \$1.5 million included in this year's budget to fund research, prevention, and education to combat the spread of Lyme and tick-borne diseases. My family and I spend a lot of time outdoors hiking and hunting across the Hudson Valley and personally have been impacted by a tick bite this year. I know how important this funding can be, we must get this done."

