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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 22, 2009

COUNTY URGES GOV. TO SIGN CAMP BILL

New law would allow county health department to close loophole in way camps are monitored

Westchester County Executive Andy Spano today urged Governor David Paterson to sign into law a bill that will enable the Westchester County Department of Health to protect the safety and well-being of thousands more campers in Westchester. The bill closes a loophole that keeps local health departments throughout New York State from inspecting children's summer camps where more than half of the activities are conducted indoors.

The bill was sponsored by State Sen. Suzi Oppenheimer, D-Mamaroneck, and Assemblywoman Amy Paulin, D-Scarsdale, and passed the State Senate and Assembly last Thursday. It will affect campers statewide.

"Whether they attend a traditional outdoor camp or one where more than half of the activities are indoors, all children deserve the protection afforded by a thorough camp inspection by the Westchester County Department of Health," said Spano. "As it should, this bill defines a children's camp by the risk of its activities instead of whether it's primarily indoors or out. We ask the Governor to move swiftly to sign this bill to help keep all Westchester campers safe each summer."

Paulin, a bill sponsor, said "My legislation will protect our children by ensuring that summer camps that conduct their activities indoors such as circus camps and many sports camps are held to the same safety requirements as outdoor camps. Currently our children are at risk and parents are unaware that the law is not protecting them. We hope the Governor will sign this important legislation."

"I am pleased to have sponsored this legislation, which will protect the thousands of campers statewide who attend summer day camps that are primarily indoors," said Senator Suzi Oppenheimer (D-Mamaroneck).

(More)

"Day camps should be fun, enjoyable -- and most of all, safe places for our children to spend their summer days. The bill gives parents the peace of mind in knowing that the camps they select for their children will meet the County's health and safety standards."

The county Health Department inspects more than 260 camps each summer. These comprehensive inspections cover everything from staff training and certifications to camp health and fire safety as well as waterfront activities. Next summer, after this bill becomes law, the county Health Department will have the authority to inspect **all** summer day camps, including at least two dozen that had not previously been covered under the law.

County Health Commissioner Joshua Lipsman, MD, JD acknowledged that, while passage of the law will result in a slight increase in workload, "every parent who sends his child to a camp in Westchester should not have to worry that the life and safety of his child depends on whether a particular camp conducts 50 percent or 51 percent of its activities indoors."

The county has worked with its partners in the New York State Association of County Health Officials (NYSACHO), the New York State Association of Counties, the New York State Camp Directors Association, the New York State Association of Counties, as well as state legislators, to get the bill passed.

Doug Volan, the director of Mount Tom Day Camp in New Rochelle and the former president of the New York State Camp Director's Association, said the Camp Director's Association fully supports this bill and had worked toward its passage.

"We have been advocating for this for years," Volan said. "All children who attend camps in the state, whether indoor or outdoor, need the same protections, such as appropriate supervision and properly trained staff. It shouldn't matter whether they swim or climb rocks indoors or out. I'm surprised this was not done years ago."

Linda Wagner, the Executive Director of NYSACHO, an association of all 58 local health departments in New York State, noted that NYSACHO has also worked actively over the years to secure passage of the law. "This law is so important to ensure that camps throughout New York State are held to the same health and safety standards regardless of the county and whether the camp is 'outdoors' or 'indoors.' When the potential cost of a child attending an unpermitted and uninspected camp could be so high, none of us can place a monetary or resource value on the extent to which any child attending a camp in New York State should be placed at unnecessary risk."