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Probation Association of New Jersey

Serving New Jersey Since 1904

An affiliate of the American Probation and Parole Association

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Keeping a Close Eye on Trenton for Probation Officers Presidential Newsletter by George Christie, President of PANJ August 2006

In the fervor of the state budget process and the unfortunate shutdown of the state on July 1, 2006 that lead to Probation Officers being furloughed for a week, we kept a keen eye on the issues that were perceived as potentially detrimental or beneficial to our members. Given the extraordinary nature of the budget this year, and the historic summer special session that has been convened, I felt that it was important to communicate with PANJ's membership on important issues.

State Budget 2007 and the State Shutdown

Chief among the issues of concern during the Fiscal Year 2007 budget debate were proposals to slash benefits for state employees, including Probation Officers, and cut salaries by 15 percent. Although this ludicrous proposal was dismissed during the budget, supporters such as Senator Steve Sweeney and Assemblyman Paul Moriarity and Jerry Green claim that they will continue to push it particularly during next year's state employee state contract negotiations and others future negotiations. Governor Corzine fought throughout the budget process to honor existing contracts that guaranteed salaries and benefits.

To voice our opposition to the degradation of benefits for state employees, PANJ issued a letter to the editor to all daily newspapers. PANJ leaders also participated in State House rallies with fellow public employees to urge a favorable and quick resolution to the budget stand-off. We convened a board meeting during the state shutdown to discuss our public relations and lobbying strategy during that time. Fortunately, drastic measures were not necessary and the state re-opened with employees being paid for the time they were furloughed.

Budget Victories

The \$31 billion Fiscal Year 2007 State Budget did include funding for anti-gang programs touted by Governor Corzine. Among the allocations made is \$2 million for law enforcement, local authorities, and community groups to fight gang activity. The budget also included \$17 million in funding for a priority of Governor Corzine's – funding the Halfway Back program (HWB) that works with non-violent parolees who enter the program as opposed to returning to prison. This worthwhile program provides critical services such as drug treatment, relapse prevention, life skills training and anger management. The one million in increased funding will ensure that additional 150 parolees are served each year.

Funding for the Judiciary was slightly trimmed by \$4 million but seen as “Savings from Administrative Efficiencies.” It does not appear that funding for probation services *per se* were affected by the budget.

Special Legislative Session

Now that the state is back in business we find ourselves at the beginning of a historical summer special session of the Legislature called to once-and-for-all tackle the state’s highest-in-the-nation property taxes. Governor Corzine called the Senate and Assembly together on July 28th to address them and convene the special session. Four legislative committees were to be convened to work on explicit issues areas affecting property taxes. The committees are: the Joint Legislative Committee on Public Employee Benefits Reform; the Joint Legislative Committee on Government Consolidation and Shared Services; the Joint Legislative Committee on Public School Funding Reform; and the Joint Legislative Committee on Citizens’ Convention and Constitutional Reform.

These bi-partisan, bi-cameral committees will begin meeting in August and will work in to the fall. Governor Corzine has issued an edict that he would like tangible results of this special session by the end of the calendar year. Should no progress be made, he will then call for a constitutional convention.

Pension System and Government Consolidation

Obviously, PANJ will be greatly concerned with the activities of the Joint Legislative Committee on Public Employee Benefits Reform reviewing the state benefits and pension system. The committee is charged with reviewing and formulating proposals that address abuses of the system of benefits provided to the public employees and to control the costs of the State and its political subdivisions for public employee retirement, health care and other benefits. We will be incredibly concerned with proposals trying to strip existing employees of their deserved benefits while watching to see if in-coming new employees are going to continue to be presented with a similar benefits package. This committee is likely to make recommendations of significant interest particularly given the increasing cost of the state pension system to the State. Moreover, Senator Sweeney and Assemblyman Moriarity did introduce several pieces of legislation regarding overhauls to the pension system. The fate of these bills will be of great concern to our membership.

In addition, the Joint Legislative Committee on Government Consolidation and Shared Services will review and formulate proposals that address the sharing of services and regionalization of functions at all levels of government. The committee also will consider proposals to consolidate or eliminate State agency functions and State agencies or commissions. While the committee is likely to focus primarily on proposals regarding sharing municipal government, state government consolidation may be tackled. As this committee works through the process, we will need to keep an eye out to see if there is an opportunity to raise the issue of consolidation probation and parole services.

In Closing....

During the remainder of the summer, Trenton will be uncharacteristically a-buzz with activities surrounding the Legislature’s Special Session. And, as it normally does, the full Legislature will return in September. PANJ representatives and our Trenton-based consultants will remain on the look-out to keep us aware of our priority issues.