

LESNIAK AND CUNNINGHAM ANNOUNCE EFFORTS TO
REFORM CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM IN NEW JERSEY

Comprehensive Package Would Save Tax
Dollars and Reduce Repeat Offenses

TRENTON -- At a news conference at the Statehouse today, Senators Raymond J. Lesniak and Sandra Bolden Cunningham and criminal justice advocates announced the introduction of a comprehensive package of bills sponsored by the Senators to create a pathway to reform of New Jersey's criminal justice system and rehabilitation for criminal offenders.

"As a nation that imprisons more of its residents per capita than any country in the world, we should continually evaluate our penal justice system to determine if our current policies provide protection for the safety of our residents and are cost-effective, or if changes are needed," said Senator Lesniak, D-Union. "The four bills we are announcing today are designed to reduce waste and inefficiency in our criminal justice system and redirect resources to better protect the public by reducing repeat offenses. We have asked that these bills be moved in both houses prior to the budget break, so we can get on with changing our criminal justice system to make it more cost effective and to provide better safety to our residents."

"This is a matter of fairness and fiscal sense for nonviolent offenders currently serving in the criminal justice system, and a matter of public safety for the rest of the State of New Jersey," said Senator Cunningham, D-Hudson. "Under the current system, nonviolent offenders are warehoused with violent offenders, and often learn to become better criminals, rather than receive treatment for substance abuse that they so desperately need. These four bills will ensure that we direct our corrections spending to make a difference in the lives of nonviolent offenders, and that we ensure access to a job and the opportunity to support themselves upon release."

Last week, Senators Lesniak and Cunningham introduced a package of bills to address the parole and corrections systems in New Jersey. Among the bills that the Senators introduced are:

* [S907](#) a bill which would require the State Parolee Board to release offenders at the time of parole eligibility, unless the offender has committed a serious disciplinary infraction while incarcerated or has not participated in rehabilitation programs offered in prison;

* [S881](#) a bill which amends the existing statute to give judges and prosecutors additional discretion to admit certain offenders into a "drug court" program to emphasize substance abuse treatment over incarceration;

* [S876](#) a bill which amends the liquor licensing law to allow licensees to employ ex-offenders without a special permit. Currently, licensees have to get the permission of the State to employ ex-offenders;

* [S878](#) a bill which would prohibit public and private employers from automatically disqualifying ex-offenders from employment.

The bill sponsors said that package of bills is designed to encourage drug treatment and rehabilitation and remove counterproductive barriers to employment of ex-offenders.

"I am optimistic that the legislation proposed by Senators Lesniak and Cunningham will have a positive impact on recently released non-violent prisoners, who have paid their debt to society and are willing to now contribute to the greater good," said Union County Prosecutor Theodore J. Romankow. "This legislation aims to stop the cycle of

crime and permit parolees to take an important first step toward productive lives. Commitment to these men and women returning to society should benefit us all and offer them the opportunity to reconstruct their lives in a productive way. I also consider expansion of the drug courts to be an important part of this entire package. Non-violent offenders who suffer from mental illness and addiction should be considered for treatment and diversion from the criminal justice system, when warranted."

The four bills are currently pending before the Senate Judiciary Committee and the Law and Public Safety Committee. Identical legislation, sponsored by Assemblyman Joe Cryan, D-Union, was also introduced in the Assembly, and the three sponsors have asked for swift consideration in that house as well.