

Probation officers oppose new safety standards

Home News Tribune Online 09/15/06

By **LAUREN O. KIDD**
GANNETT STATE BUREAU
lkidd@gannett.com

TRENTON — New Jersey probation officers have not been permitted to make arrests since early last month, and they feel the safety of both themselves and state residents is at risk as a result.

"We require the proper tools and training to provide for the safety of our communities," George Christie, president of the Probation Association of New Jersey, said at a Statehouse news conference yesterday.

Christie's group and law-enforcement associations across the state oppose the "Probation Field Supervision and Safety Standards" the state Supreme Court approved in June.

The directive took effect last month. Implementation plans must be submitted by Monday. Among the document's orders, police officers, not probation officers, must arrest and transport probationers if a probationer commits another crime. Police officers must also be present during search and seizure activities.

"These standards reiterate that probation officers have very specific work to do for their clients, but that they are not law-enforcement officers," said Winnie Comfort, spokeswoman for the state judiciary.

"It is critically important for the probation officers to be safe and to rely on law enforcement when the responsibility falls to law enforcement based on their experience, their training and their mission," Comfort said.

Approximately 130,000 people are on probation in New Jersey, and officers have an average caseload of 125, Christie said. About 64,000 of those 130,000 actively meet with probation officers, Comfort said.

Some critics of the judiciary said the move requiring a greater police presence could spread law-enforcement ranks too thin.

"The court appears to want to have it both ways, giving the probation officers a mission, but taking away the tools and basically giving them no power out there to do what they have to do," said Christopher Burgos, first vice president of State Troopers Fraternal Association of New Jersey. "It's a clear message to encourage and promote lawlessness."

More than 30 states consider probation officers law-enforcement officers, training them in self defense and allowing them to carry firearms, Christie said. Garden State probation officers have not carried guns on the job since 1974.

Probation officers in 20 counties made no arrests last year, Comfort said. The exception was in Passaic County, where they made roughly 170 arrests, she said.

"We deal with every possible human ugliness and corruption imaginable, and our jobs are dangerous because we are forced to go into the field to keep track of these criminals," said Daniel Bergin, president of the Passaic County Probation Officers Association.