

Christie: For a more efficient probationary system

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BY GEORGE CHRISTIE

THIS WEEK, as we do once a year, probation and parole officers pause to commemorate the successes of the past year, but also to look at ways to improve the system as we celebrate Probation, Parole and Community Supervision Week.

Probation officers work daily to rehabilitate offenders who are spared prison sentences by being assigned to community supervision. This is no easy task for officers, given the myriad crimes committed by probationers and growing caseloads caused by plea bargaining. Oftentimes, they are fighting uphill against recidivism rates and a severe lack of cohesion in New Jersey 's probation system.

New Jersey ranks ninth in the country in size of the adult probation system, with an estimated 139,000 adults. At an average caseload of 187 per officer, it's a huge feat that our officers are able to monitor the success of these offenders through substance abuse treatment and counseling resources, community service opportunities and job performance monitoring.

The obstacles for probation officers are just as great as the responsibilities.

In 2002, former Sen. John Edwards, D-N.C., said it best: "There are about 4 1/2 million people on probation and parole today, and most of them will break the law again.... The system is overburdened, understaffed, inconsistent and completely unsuccessful....What needs to happen in probation and parole today isn't all that different from what happened to police work 20 years ago."

Many New Jersey probation officers believe, however, that the state of the probation system is tenuous at best. We look at other states that have crafted a stronger and more sensible structure of community supervision by allowing for cohesion between parole and probation.

Most notably, many states across the country situate probation and parole services under one roof in the executive branch of government. This allows for easier information-sharing and greater communication across the lines, particularly when it comes to training.

An executive branch-based community supervision system would strengthen the supervision of offenders who might be assigned to parole as well as probation.

Our present probation system, based in the judiciary, often results in duplicative supervision costs that require thousands of state dollars that could be more wisely invested in protecting our communities.

For this reason, the Probation Association of New Jersey wholeheartedly supports efforts by state Sen. John Girgenti, D-Hawthorne, and Assemblyman Gordon Johnson, D-Englewood, to transform the New Jersey community supervision system to make it more unified and strong.

Their legislation would move the Division of Probation into the Board of Parole by asking the people of New Jersey to empower the Legislature to make the transformation.

Such unification would be a wiser investment of state tax dollars. Every year, New Jersey taxpayers spend \$34,600 per year to institutionalize each inmate in the corrections system, according to the state Department of Corrections.

The cost to rehabilitate a probationer is significantly less. Some estimates place the cost of community supervision at \$1,250. But, the direct improvement in the lives of offenders and

the community is far greater.

As we commemorate this year's Probation, Parole and Community Supervision week as a state, we must think about the best way to invest our dollars in the system and to move the system forward. Over the course of 130 years, community supervision has grown from one man, John Augustus of Boston , who took in a drunkard.

New Jersey 's probation officers –“ whether they work in adult or juvenile supervision, family court, or child support - supervise hundreds of thousands of individuals across the state.

Now is the time to take one more step forward as a unified community supervision system, hopefully in the Board of Parole.

George Christie is president of the 104-year-old Probation Association of New Jersey, which represents more than 2,800 officers and supervisors.

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