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***Probation Officers Provide to be Critical Companions
in Law Enforcement***

By: Michael J. Madonna, President, New Jersey State PBA

On a daily basis, New Jersey's law enforcement officers must be on ready alert to protect us from hidden dangers in our community, identify potential threats to homeland and hometown security, and root out obvious criminal activity in our towns. Dealing with this host of issues requires the round-the-clock surveillance and proactive engagement of law enforcement agencies across the state.

It takes the dedication of every man and woman in uniform to meet the daily public safety demands. Our responsibilities are just as critical to public safety in New Jersey as the responsibilities of our colleagues, the state's probation officers. Similar to the role of police officers, probation officers are charged with ensuring that our families are not victimized by wayward criminals. With the numbers of probationers soaring to an estimated 130,000 adults and 20,000 annually, there needs to be a specialized group of highly trained probation officers able to handle probationers living in our communities despite warrants being issued for their arrest.

In 2001, then-Governor DiFrancesco signed into law the Probation Officer Community Safety Act that paved the way for the 200 probation officers to be trained in the state's police academy and allowed to carry a firearm when carrying out their duties and apprehending dangerous probationers. These officers would enhance the state's cadre of public safety organizations focused on keeping our streets safe.

During recent oral arguments before the state Supreme Court regarding the creation of the Probation Officer Community Safety Unit, attorneys for the state claimed that probation officers can simply take a law enforcement officer with them when venturing into extremely dangerous neighborhoods. Given the daily duties of police officers, this is simply not always feasible. Re-assigning police personnel to accompany probation officers at home visits could create a compromising hole in our public safety net. That is not an option in today's society.

The answer to dealing with the more than 25,000 arrest warrants issued annually for probationers cannot be to remove police officers from their duties when well-trained probation officers could handle the situation appropriately. The Judiciary is simply looking to pass-the-buck as opposed to allowing their probation officers to increase the duties that they will readily accept.

While members of law enforcement are ready, willing and able to step in to intercept probationers who have warrants issued for them, the Probation Officer Community Safety Unit would have the authority to do so expeditiously and effectively. Unfortunately, due to the legal wrangling initiated by the Judiciary, the Unit has yet to be created.

The New Jersey State Policemen's Benevolent Association believes that the state Supreme Court should rule on behalf of the Probation Association and uphold the Community Safety Act. The public safety challenges facing our communities demand an additional line of defense. It's time for the Judiciary to place the public's safety above legal appeals. They should start by upholding the Probation Officer Community Safety Act and allowing probation officers to begin their training.

Editor's Note: Michael Madonna is the President of the New Jersey State Policemen's Benevolent Association (PBA), which represents more than 350 individual local police unions statewide.