

## Trenton Times

### Probation officers decry loss of arresting power

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**BY LINDA STEIN**

Already irked by a state Supreme Court decision that denied them guns, New Jersey probation officers are up in arms about new regulations that require them to seek the help of police whenever they need to take someone into custody.

"We can't make arrests and searches unless there's a police officer there," said George Christie, president of the Probation Association of New Jersey, the union for the probation officers.

Christie said the new regulations, handed down by the judiciary last week, are not what is required under a statute, which gives probation officers the right to make arrests and search and seize property if they find illegal contraband during a home visit.

"The judiciary is now saying the probation officer is just a social worker," Christie said. "That's not the way probation is conducted around the country."

Winnie Comfort, a spokeswoman for the judiciary, said probation officers' safety is the primary reason for the rule change.

The rules address issues outlined in the Supreme Court opinion striking down a law that would have allowed some probation officers to carry guns, Comfort said.

"Probation officer safety is a critical issue for the judiciary," Comfort said. Probation officers have called on police for help if needed all along, she added. "Probation officers are not law enforcement officers. Probation officers serve the courts. In that role they cannot perform executive branch functions of law enforcement."

"It doesn't make us any more safe," Christie argued. "Now they want us to go into drug areas with no protection. The police officers have their own jobs. Why not train the probation officers to do their jobs? There's no reason why a trained probation officer can't help someone be rehabilitated."

If a probation officer waits for a police officer to come to a scene, the violator will likely be long gone and any drugs or other illegal items flushed down the toilet, he said.

A state police union president believes the rule change is a mistake.

"Now we have thousands of court officers who are going to be relying on armed law enforcement officers to do their job and there is no reason for it," said Dave Jones, the president of the State Troopers Fraternal Association. "They are increasing our workload for no reason at a time when no one can afford it."

Peter Page, a spokesman for the Trenton Police Department, said his department "works with the whole alphabet soup of federal and state agencies. We work with everybody. If this is what the rules are, we'll work with probation and get some advantage out of it."

Currently, about 130,000 adults and 20,000 juveniles are on probation in the state, Christie said. More than 40 percent of probationers who committed a felony are re-arrested for new felonies within three years after being placed on probation.