

Select probation officers need weapons to ward off danger

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BY GEORGE CHRISTIE

The Asbury Park Press' Jan. 10 editorial "Don't arm probation officers" failed to accurately depict the public safety issue being weighed by state Supreme Court justices who will determine if probation officers are able to carry firearms. At the heart of the case is an unimplemented law that allows for a fraction of the nearly 3,000 well-trained probation officers to carry firearms while on duty and dealing with the most dangerous offenders.

Under the Community Safety Act, 200 probation officers would be trained at the state's police academy to use firearms while facing violent situations. These officers would be taught to safely apprehend and arrest probationers for whom arrest warrants have been issued. The judiciary's legal challenges have prevented probation officers from beginning this crucial training.

Annually, an estimated 25,000 probationers violate the terms of their probation. It is imperative that they are apprehended to protect our communities and families from offenders who might commit further criminal acts.

On a daily basis, probation officers deal with probationers ranging from sex offenders to gang members to those charged with weapons violations. All too often, these offenders come to the probation office while in possession of a weapon or have firearms in plain sight when officers make home visits. Without a means of protecting themselves or arresting these offenders for probation violations, officers cannot apprehend offending probationers.

The editorial claims "there's no evidence that substantial numbers of probation officers are injured on the job." That is inaccurate. According to our estimates, between 300 and 400 probation officers are victimized each year. Incidents range from being held at gunpoint to being assaulted to being attacked by vicious animals coaxed by probationers. Under guidelines set forth by the judiciary, probation officers have nothing more than pepper spray and their wits about them to survive volatile interactions.

During a visit in April 2003, two probation officers were leaving a Newark home when they were ambushed and held at gunpoint. Using their knowledge of the probationer and community, the officers escaped. However, if the judiciary had not blocked the Community Safety Act, which was signed in January 2002, the officers would have had the training, protection and arrest powers necessary to diffuse the terrorizing incident.

The editorial contends that "A police officer can always accompany the probation officer on a potentially dangerous assignment." Local law enforcement is charged with multiple roles and duties that do not always allow for police officers to be freed up for home visits to probationers. The choice is then left up to probation officers to risk their personal

safety to venture into dangerous neighborhoods or allow probationers to remain unaccounted for.

Law enforcement organizations, such as the State Troopers Fraternal Association and the Policemen's Benevolent Association, support allowing probation officers to carry firearms since they understand the need to safeguard our communities. Having probation officers included in our state's arsenal of law enforcement can be beneficial in the post-9/11 world only where probation officers are supervising individuals being investigated for terrorism by the FBI.

The role of a probation officer goes far beyond making sure probationers get jobs or remain in substance abuse treatment. Probation officers work with offenders to help them become contributing members of their community and mentor probationers to prevent recidivism. In most instances, probation officers know significantly more about the individual than other members of law enforcement and can provide more insight into a person's potentially dangerous tendencies should an arrest warrant be issued for them.

When the governor and Legislature enacted the Probation Officer Community Safety Act, they recognized the usefulness of a specialized probation unit to deal with the most dangerous probationers. The need for this unit remains critical today. The Supreme Court should place the public's safety above the technical concerns raised in the case and allow for the implementation of this unit.

George Christie is president of the Probation Association of New Jersey, Brielle, which represents probation officers and their supervisors statewide.