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Probation Association of New Jersey

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An affiliate of the American Probation and Parole Association

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PRESIDENTIAL NEWSLETTER ***By: George P. Christie, president of PANJ*** ***July 2008***

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With the summer months here, I wanted to update you on the status of a few key items going on affecting the Probation Association of New Jersey (PANJ). Chief among them is the status of the negotiations for a new contract beginning July 1, 2008. Other key matters are the passage of the state budget, Early Retirement Incentive (ERI) program, public employee pension and benefit reform, transfer legislation.

STATE BUDGET

The Fiscal Year 2009 State Budget signed by the Governor is an estimated \$32.8 billion which is a half of a million dollars lower than the previous fiscal year and \$100,000 lower than his February proposal. The budget still trims state government by disbanding the Department of Personnel and the Commerce and Economic Growth Commission but keeping the Department of Agriculture.

Functions of the Department of Personnel will either be absorbed into a newly created Civil Service Commission located in the Department of Labor and Workforce Development or in the Department of Treasury. The civil service system will remain intact. The legislation disbanding this Department specifies which functions are located under which new roof. The state estimates that there will be significant cost savings by streamlining these functions.

The Judiciary budget remains unchanged for the most part from Governor Corzine's budget proposal. This budget provides the funding needed for the expansion of the drug court program which was implemented in legislation passed earlier this year. The Judiciary does not contemplate layoffs, but there may be reductions of employees resulting from attrition. Issues related to this are subject to negotiations.

The budget continues to provide property tax rebates for families whose income is below \$150,000. The budget also provides funding to municipalities to put in place the new school funding formula crafted six months ago. For the most part, the budget puts in place significant budget tightening cuts in order to get the State to start living within its means. This budget does make a sizeable contribution toward paying down state debt which continues to overshadow the fiscal health of New Jersey.

PENSION AND BENEFIT REFORM

In addition to the budget bill, the Senate and Assembly passed legislation that would reform the state's pension and benefits system for future employees as well as establish an Early Retirement Incentive (ERI) program for current employees. The key factor regarding the pension and benefit reform is that it applies to new employees. Employees already in the system are not affected. The only piece – the combination of Washington and Lincoln's Birthday as a state holiday – will apply to existing employees beginning in 2011 when the

current state employee contract expires. Governor Corzine still needs to sign this bill into law in order for the changes to go into place.

Other items in the pension reform legislation include:

- ✓ Increasing the retirement age from 60 to 62;
- ✓ Raising the minimum annual salary to be a member of the pension system to \$7,500 (to increase every year in accordance with the Consumer Price Index);
- ✓ Requiring local government employees to work 20 hours per week in order to receive state health benefits;
- ✓ Allowing employees to obtain compensation if they waive health benefits if they have alternative health coverage;
- ✓ Prohibiting state employees from using out of state pension credit toward New Jersey pension system;

EARLY RETIREMENT INCENTIVE PROGRAM:

With the approval of the State Legislature and Governor Corzine, the Early Retirement Incentive (ERI) program was put in place. Eligible employees need to apply by July 15, 2008 and retire by August 1, 2008. After seven days of submitting the paperwork, the application is irrevocable. Eligible Judiciary employees would be required to be at least 58 years of age with at least 25 years of service credit in PERS. Applicants who are not veterans will receive an additional three years of service credit in PERS; qualified veterans will receive an additional pension amount equivalent to "3/55 of the compensation upon which the retirement is based."

The date of retirement can be extended until July 1, 2009 if the Judiciary requests an extension of the employees retirement date or if the employee requests an extension; but must be approved by Treasury. Employees who participate in the ERI program are not able to work for the state for up to three years after retiring.

TRANSFER LEGISLATION:

Senate Law and Public Safety and Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman John Girgenti (D-Passaic) and Senate Majority Leader Steve Sweeney (D-Gloucester) introduced the senate companion constitutional amendment (SCR 118) in the Senate. This is a strong signal to the Judiciary and other organizations that this bill is important and has serious backers. Now with bills in both houses, we will be working with members of the respective committees to gain their support and hearings on the bills. We continue to have the commitment of Assembly Law and Public Safety Committee Chairman Johnson continues to work on the issue in the fall.

DRUG FREE SCHOOL ZONES:

The Assembly passed the bill that would give judicial discretion to courts for first-time offenders for CDS crimes committed in school zones. In lieu of jail terms, these offenders could be placed on parole or probation for their crimes. PANJ joined a coalition of supporters with the vocal stance that caseloads need to be addressed. The bill is pending in the Senate; no word on potential hearing dates in that house.

SUPERVISOR CONTRACT UPDATE

By Brad Fairchild-First Vice President, Professional Supervisory Unit

The PANJ Negotiating team for the Supervisors has been seeking and receiving input from members, preparing contract proposals, and meeting regularly with the negotiating committee of the Judiciary. The meetings, unfortunately, have not produced an agreement. It is likely that it could be months before we have a contract that can submit to the membership for ratification.

Our priorities for this contract, which will run from July 1, 2008 through June 2012, include a fair wage increase on July 1 of each year and to give more supervisors the opportunity to receive an additional range in salary before they max out. We strongly believe that the increment system which was established almost ten years ago by PANJ, should not be eroded and we are resisting the Judiciary's efforts to undercut this critical objective.

It should be no surprise that another top priority is changing the unfortunate 9.8 provision which allows the Judiciary management to remove supervisors without providing any justification. PANJ believes that Judiciary supervisors should have the same protections from arbitrary disputes which supervisors have in every other branch of state government.

We are also fighting the Judiciary's efforts to force supervisors to work additional hours without any form of compensation. The end result of this plan would be a 14% pay cut.

Other key issues include protecting supervisors from unreasonable and unfair workloads and expectations during a time when the staff is retiring and positions remain vacant, providing fair and objective hearing officers, and holding vicinages responsible for implementing state directive and policies, particularly with regards to safety.

During the next few months the negotiating team will conduct regional and county meetings to discuss the contract in greater detail. PANJ supervisors should contact their state representatives directly if they have specific concerns and questions.

The negotiating team is determined to fight for a fair contract. It may take some time to achieve our goals but we will not sacrifice the best interests of our members because the Judiciary desires a quick settlement which will seriously damage the finances and futures of its dedicated employees.