

New directive poses risks, officers say

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CAMDEN

About 100 probation officers from Camden County, supported by colleagues from other counties, rallied Friday outside the Hall of Justice to draw attention to a state directive they say puts them in physical danger.

Several spokesmen for the officers said state judiciary officials have failed to provide "reasonable provisions for health and safety" by requiring them to conduct visual inspections of the sleeping areas of individuals on probation and of the common areas in their residences.

Probation officers in New Jersey are barred from carrying weapons or handcuffs and, in Camden County, have no equipment to contact local police for backup.

Several Camden County probation officers have been "verbally counseled," the first step in a disciplinary procedure that could lead to firing, when they refused to enter a home they considered unsafe.

Guy Stills, chief of police at Rutgers University in Camden and president of the Camden County Police Chiefs Association, said Friday his organization has not been advised of the possibility of receiving calls for backup from probation officers in Camden County.

"This is one of the most dangerous cities in America. Some of these areas are hot zones," said George Christie, president of the Probation Association of New Jersey.

"Our officers understand their responsibility to rehabilitate offenders into our society and a certain level of risk that comes with the job. But the lack of safety protocols and training place our force in circumstances that go well beyond a reasonable standard of risk or the call of duty," said Christie, who joined the lunchtime demonstration.

The inspections were directed by the state judiciary in September to ensure no contraband items, such as drugs or weapons, are present where probationers live.

"That directive means our officers have to go into attics and basements," said Peter Tortoreto, a senior probation officer in Camden and first vice president of the state association.

The Probation Officers Association has filed an unsafe practice charge against the state judiciary, asking for a suspension of the home inspection policy until police protection is provided.



Photos by DENISE HENHOEFFER/Courier-Post
Probation officers march Friday in Camden to protest a state directive that they inspect the homes of offenders. Representatives are asking that the unarmed officers get police protection during the inspections.



A probation officer slides on an armband during the demonstration outside the Hall of Justice in Camden Friday.

Christie and Tortoreto said the responsibility for training probation officers on how to respond if they spot contraband is assigned by the judiciary directive to senior officers, but they have no training themselves.

"Some of our senior officers haven't been out in the field for 15 or 20 years," Tortoreto said.

"This is the first time we've had a demonstration that is not about money," Tortoreto said.

The starting salary for probation officers, who must have a college degree, is \$37,000. The pay range for senior probation officers is \$47,000 to \$76,000, Tortoreto said.

Deborah L. Robertson, operations division manager for Superior Courts in Camden County, said the county has resolved some disputes with the owners of the Parkade Building in Camden, where most of the county's probation officers work. Faced with a lawsuit, NEDMAC, the building owner, agreed to install a smoke detection and fire detection system. The Camden County Sheriff's Office has a contract with a security firm for weapons screening at the building at 5th and Market streets.

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