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Probation Association of New Jersey

Serving New Jersey Since 1904

An affiliate of the American Probation and Parole Association

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SALUTING NEW JERSEY'S PROBATION OFFICERS

By George Christie

July 11, 2005

In 1841, a Boston shoe cobbler named John Augustus convinced the Boston Police Court to place an adult drunkard under his custody. He served as a supervisor for the individual, who otherwise would have been incarcerated, as was commonplace at that time.

Augustus, who is known today as the "Father of Probation," expanded his supervisory role in later years to include overseeing children accused of stealing. With each successful reformation of accused criminals, Augustus' role as the first unofficial probation officer flew in the face of police, court clerks and turnkeys. These officers of the judicial system objected to the concept of probation because they received monetary compensation when offenders were incarcerated.

Soon states began to recognize the beneficial role of probation officers. That led to passage in 1878 of the first law creating an official state probation system in Massachusetts, which included salaried probation officers. By 1900, New Jersey followed suit along with a handful of other states that recognized a probation program as a key component of the justice system.

New Jersey's probation system has played a significant role in safeguarding our communities during the past decade in particular. The state's probation officers currently supervise approximately 130,000 adults and 20,000 juveniles serving probation as a result of charges for murder, sexual assault, gun possession, domestic violence, burglary, driving under the influence, and other serious offenses.

Alarming, the number of dangerous and repeat offenders sentenced to probation has continued to rise despite a decrease in the state's overall crime rate. This translates into an average caseload of 187 probationers under each officer's charge.

During the week beginning July 17, New Jersey will honor its more than 2,000 probation officers, along with the state's parole officers. The officers represent and reflect the cross-section of New Jersey in every corner of the state with one common mission: to make our communities a safer place to live for our families.

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These dedicated men and women often place themselves in harm's way to ensure the safety of our communities. Probation officers are assaulted and physically threatened in many instances, and unsafe conditions often preclude them from locating probationers.

Threats to probation officers in the community are ever increasing. Among the most dangerous incidents:

- On Oct. 23, 2002, while in a Salem County courtroom, a probationer threatened to shoot his probation officer; and
- During separate home visits in 2002, two probation officers were attacked and injured by dogs probationers unleashed on them. As are most probation officers, these were unarmed and unable to defend themselves against such vicious attacks.
- During an April 2003 routine home visit in Newark, two Probation Officers came upon a group of males involved in drug activity. One man pointed a hand gun at the head of one of the officers threatening to shoot. The two officers were then held at gunpoint until they were able to convince the offender to release them.

Regardless of the potential and real dangers, probation officers continue to place the safety of our communities at a higher priority than their own personal safety.

By serving as supervisors, and oftentimes mentors, to adults and juveniles in the justice system, probation officers strive to instill a sense of responsibility in these individuals. In keeping with the legacy of the "Father of Probation," probation officers use the resources and services available to them to continue to protect our families and communities. Moreover, the average cost to New Jersey to supervise each probationer is \$200 per year as opposed to the estimated \$30,000 cost of incarceration.

In honor of National Probation, Parole and Community Supervision Week, it is imperative that we investigate and strongly consider ways to improve the existing probation system. Probation officers should be afforded the ability to protect themselves against violent probationers. All too often, the safety of our communities is placed in the hands of probation officers. Without the probation system and probation officers who are its backbone, our state's judicial and corrections systems would falter.

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George Christie is president of the 101-year-old Probation Association of New Jersey (PANJ), which represents more than 2,000 probation officers.