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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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## Prevention Goes Hand-in-Hand with Recidivism

By: George P. Christie, President of the Probation Association of New Jersey

The statistics are staggering. Criminal offenders return to the corrections system too quickly. Of the four thousand adult inmates who are released from correctional facilities annually, roughly 65 percent are re-arrested within five years in New Jersey. What's more alarming is the fact that 37 percent of the 1,600 juvenile offenders released each year are incarcerated again within two years.

For many of these offenders, their first run in with the law results in a probation sentence that was clearly not a heeded warning. Too many skirt their responsibility of a probation sentence. Too many commit secondary crimes while serving a probation sentence. To offset the staggering recidivism rates, we need to work with offenders before their lives become deeply rooted in criminal activities.

A recent study released by the Rutgers School of Criminal Justice showed that there is a noticeable difference in the recidivism rates among parolees depending upon how they are supervised. Other studies also have shown that drug courts have had great success rates among non-violent drug offenders if they are placed under intensive supervision and treatment. So then why are we not looking at ways to strengthen New Jersey's community supervision system on a broader scale for first-time probationers? Why are we not focusing more attention on the probation system?

The number of offenders supervised under probation is nearly double or triple the number of offenders incarcerated. New Jersey spends \$35,000 per year per inmate to incarcerate offenders compared to the estimated cost of \$1,250 per individual each year to supervise a probationer. There are cost savings to be realized by placing offenders under probation supervision as opposed to incarceration. However, it is only a monetary savings if we cannot "save" these offenders from a potential life of escalating crime while they are being supervised in the community.

The reality of probation in New Jersey is that it is used as a means of plea bargaining which swells the number of supervised offenders. According to statistics published by the National Institute of Corrections, New Jersey's incarceration rate was 23 percent lower than the national average in 2006.

Yet, the state's probation population rate was 15 percent higher than the national average in the same year. No efforts have been made though to soften the impact of the increase of probationers who need improved supervision. This would involve investing in additional officers that would ensure probationers are complying with court orders thus enhancing the protection of the community

A pilot program, the Greater Mercer Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative, was recently launched to work to coordinate prisoner occupational re-entry by combining efforts of local government and organizations. In making the announcement, State Parole Board Chairman Peter J. Barnes stated that "One of the very important parts of the parole process is making sure that the person who comes out is going to have a shot at redeeming himself."

We applaud efforts to work to rehabilitate parolees, but we also need to launch similar programs to intervene in and improve the lives of probationers. The number of offenders in the corrections system who would need re-entry programs can be reduced if we work to stop the path leading from probation to incarceration. There is a clear line for many offenders from probation to incarceration to parole. It's time we draw a line in the sand and work with offenders before it's too late.

*Editor's Note: George P. Christie serves as the president of the Probation Association of New Jersey which was founded in 1904 to represent the state's probation supervisors and officers.*