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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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For Immediate Release
July 16,, 2007

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LAW ENFORCEMENT, LEGISLATORS CALL FOR AN INTEGRATED COMMUNITY SUPERVISION SYSTEM *Legislative Package Would Transfer Probation Services to State Parole Board, Grant Probation Officers with Police Powers*

Trenton, NJ -- Leading law enforcement organizations and legislators held an afternoon press conference today to promote a recently introduced legislative package that would create a more integrated community supervision system and expand the responsibilities of probation officers. The coalition, led by the Probation Association of New Jersey (PANJ), has teamed up to advocate for the transfer of probation services from the judiciary to the executive branch as a means of creating a more seamless system to supervise potentially dangerous offenders.

"The community supervision system as it currently stands in New Jersey is fragmented," said George Christie, president of PANJ. "The rise in gang violence and the increasing numbers of probationers because of plea bargaining has created a probation system that is not working at its greatest potential. Transferring probation services to the Executive Branch would give law enforcement leaders greater oversight of the safety protocols and procedures affecting probation officers and probationers."

There are currently 139,000 adults and 20,000 juveniles in New Jersey's probation system. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, New Jersey has the ninth largest probation system in the nation and the tenth highest rate of supervised adults at 2,117 probationers per 100,000 residents. The estimated 2,800 probation officers oversee an average of 187 probationers per person.

The first measure, Assembly Concurrent Resolution 266 (ACR-266), would authorize a ballot question asking voters to allow for the transfer of probation functions to the State Parole Board.

(more)

Because probation functions are currently under the supervision of the Judiciary and the State Parole Board is located within the Executive Branch, voter approval would be required in order for the Legislature to transfer the division. Once voter approval is acquired, passage of a second bill Assembly Bill 4458 (A-4458) that would create a Bureau of Probation within the State Parole Board would be required to formally transition the agency.

There are currently 33 states wherein adult probation and parole services are located within the same executive or legislative branch department. In 22 states juvenile probation and parole are similarly situated.

“We realize we have a long road ahead of us to convince the public that this is the right thing to do, but our ultimate goal is to ensure that those very same members of the public are protected from offenders in the community supervision system,” said Christie.

The final piece of legislation, Assembly Bill 4360 (A-4360), would grant police powers to probation officers and allow them to assist in the detection, apprehension, arrest and conviction of offenders. New Jersey currently provides police powers to law enforcement officers, parole officers and corrections officers. There are 26 states that consider probation officers to be peace or law enforcement officers if they supervise adults; 15 states designate juvenile probation officers as law enforcement or peace officers.

“Officers in several New Jersey counties were previously authorized to assist in the apprehension of probationers who had active warrants for their arrest. However, the Judiciary stripped these officers of these duties nearly a year ago leaving a potentially gaping hole in the apprehension of offenders who refuse to follow the terms of their probation sentence,” Christie said. “Police powers would ensure that there are more eyes and ears on the streets that have the authority to step in and arrest a probationer who is blatantly breaking the law.”

“As we watch gang violence to reach into every corner of our state, it will be increasingly critical for law enforcement to have as many resources as possible to arrest and detain offenders who threaten the safety and stability of our communities,” said Anthony Wieners, president-elect of the New Jersey Policemen’s Benevolent Association (PBA). “Granting police powers to probation officers will grow the ranks of officers capable of apprehending potentially dangerous offenders.”

The press conference also was attended by Assembly Law and Public Safety Committee Chairman Gordon Johnson (D-Bergen), who is the prime sponsor of the legislative package; Assembly Judiciary Committee Chairwoman Linda R. Greenstein (D-Middlesex); Assemblyman Richard Merkt (R-Morris); Tony Villalobos representing the New Jersey Parole Officers Association; Michael Madonna, president; and Dave Jones, president, State Troopers Fraternal Association of New Jersey.