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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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Moving the State's Community Supervision System Forward

By: George Christie, president of the Probation Association of NJ

For more than 165 years, our nation has been served by dedicated individuals working to strengthen the community supervision system. Through probation and parole services, more than 200,000 convicted offenders are safely supervised in our communities to provide order and oversight of these individuals.

The state-based community supervision system began in 1869 when the Massachusetts legislature required a state agent to be present if court actions might result in the placement of a child in a reformatory. Today, probation is authorized in all states and is an integral part of the juvenile justice system. Many foreign nations, in fact, also have adopted approaches based on the United States prototype.

Offenders under probation or parole may suffer from a myriad of problems that hinder them from leading law-abiding lives. Probation officers find solutions to many of these problems. Helping an offender locate employment, drug or alcohol treatment, suitable housing or psychological counseling are just a few examples of how community supervision takes an active role in providing solutions for both the offender and the community.

Also, probation officers in New Jersey enforce and issue child support warrants for "dead-beat" parents, perform child custody investigations, interview jail inmates, recommend if inmates should serve prison sentences, and present restraining order cases to the courts.

Probation, Parole and Community Supervision Week, July 16 – 22, 2006, is a prime time to highlight the important roles serviced by these officers and their dedicated service to public safety. One of the most important roles noted by both the public and those who work in community supervision is public safety. By monitoring offenders, making sure they meet the conditions of their supervision, and notifying others if an offender is judged to be a danger to him or herself or others, community supervision professionals help keep all of us safer.

Not only do probation, parole and community supervision officers serve others through their profession, but they are also some of the most actively involved individuals in their communities. They work with and volunteer countless hours to victims groups, local charities, faith groups, youth associations and literacy programs because they see the great impact such work can make on the lives of those under supervision.

In the near future, our state should forward at way to improve New Jersey's community supervision system. Chief among ways to do so is by combining probation and parole services together under the state's Department of Law and Public Safety. The vast majority of states have opted for one unit to provide community supervision services. This system ensures that offenders are carefully overseen in our communities while preventing duplicity in administrative services and costs.

Furthermore, there need to be streamlined processes that support supervision management. There are 18 vicinages across the state that oversee probationers, but they operate as virtual fiefdoms where there are few uniform standards and procedures in place. Probation officers have a right to work under standardized processes put in place to normalize community supervision services. More lucrative benefits, increased challenges and opportunities for the professional growth of probation officers also need to be addressed as a means of increasing officer retention and recruitment.

The community supervision system is only as strong as the officers who make it work on a daily basis. During the course of the community supervision system, changes have been implemented to improve it. But, the time has come for probation services to receive a significant face-lift in the form of combining it with parole services and standardizing protocols.

**EDITOR'S NOTE:* George Christie is the president of the 102-year old PANJ, which represents more than 2,800 officers and supervisor