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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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Community Supervision and Gang Violence Prevention In Our Communities

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

****EDITOR'S NOTE:*** George Christie is the president of the 110-year old PANJ, which represents more than 2,800 officers and supervisors. Christie has himself been a probation officer for almost 27 years.

In all of our hometowns there are a number of individuals currently under the watchful eye of the state's probation officers. They are man in line in front of you at the grocery store or the fellow customer at the pharmacy. They could be the volunteer at the community recreation center or a parent of your child's friend.

Since these individuals are not a threat to our families or our neighborhoods, the courts have placed them under community supervision through either probation or parole services. This system allows offenders to fulfill the mandates assigned by the courts while continuing to be active members of our society. In many instances, it allows families to remain whole while a father, mother or child fulfills their debt to society with assurances that the public's safety is not jeopardized.

Today, there are approximately 130,000 adults and 20,000 juveniles on probation in New Jersey while an estimated 4 million Americans across the country are likewise supervised. Under the current community supervision system, offenders who must first serve jail time, are later granted parole if deemed appropriate. Other offenders, or those who violate the terms of their parole, are sentenced to probation. The supervision of a probation officer or a parole officer allows the courts to extend their watchful eye in to our communities.

When community supervision first came about in New Jersey more than 100 years ago, the world that probation officers dealt with was much more different than it is today. In fact, our country's first probation officer, John Augustus, supervised an individual who was a drunkard. Today, the violations leading to probation can vary from assault to burglary to a parole violation for a myriad of violent crimes. What's more troubling in the immense impact that the state's gang population is having on the community supervision system.

Most probation officers are dealing with an increase in gang members who participate in an estimated 148 "distinct" gangs serving probation sentences. The growing ranks of gangs in New Jersey communities are a direct threat to our families and probation officers who strive to protect them. They are increasingly violent with a decreasing respect for our neighborhoods and families.

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Probation officers who work solely with juvenile offenders often see the same faces of youths who thumb their nose at the law by habitually committing crimes or who knowingly violate their parole conditions. A recent survey conducted by the state Attorney General found that the number of gang members almost doubled from 2001 to 2004 reaching 15,777 in that year alone. Alarming, the number of gang members under age 17 and under rose from 2,843 in 2001 to 6,925 in 2004. Our state must do more to end this cycle of violence that starts at such an early age.

Governor Jon S. Corzine has suggested that we do just that. In his proposed Fiscal Year 2007 State Budget, he selected gang violence prevention as one of a handful of initiatives to receive additional financial support and attention. This heightened focus wisely sees gang violence prevention and education as a strong investment that will benefit our communities multiple times over.

The state's Department of Law and Public Safety estimates an increase in gang membership to 17,000 today up from 7,400 members in 2001. Given the prevalence of gang members who commit crimes, it is safe to say that the number of gang members on probation has risen just as exponentially.

Under the Governor's proposal, he allocates \$2 million to fund the efforts of law enforcement, localities, and community groups to address gang activity. The budget proposal particularly notes a need for corrections and community supervision services to assist gang members in becoming productive members of society.

Governor Corzine's budget proposal also includes \$1 million in increased funding for the Halfway Back program (HWB) to work with parolees who have committed technical violations but enter the program as opposed to returning to prison. The goal of the Corzine budget proposal is to offer services for an additional 150 parolees each year while stemming the tide of recidivism. Under this initiative, these parolees will undergo drug treatment, relapse prevention, life skills training, anger management, employment counseling, or housing and transitional support services. It's certainly a wise investment in the fight against gang violence.

Moreover, the additional resources will be helpful in working to end the strain on the state's community supervision system dealing with gang members who choose to re-offend as opposed to finding the straight-and-narrow. We need to encourage these types of programs that look for productive and meaningful ways of turning around the lives of youths actively recruited by gangs.

Many municipalities across the state have begun creating units within local law enforcement trained to root out gang activity. The Governor's proposed budget goes one-step further in calling for the creation of a unit within the Division of Criminal Justice to focus on gang violence and organized crime. These extensions of law enforcement will reach in to our communities that probation officers enter every day.

What does community supervision and gang violence mean in dollars and cents for New Jerseyans? According to the American Probation and Parole Association, it costs approximately \$1,250 per year to keep a person under probation supervision or \$30,000 per year to incarcerate an individual. The costs to our communities, however, if gang violence is not contained could potential be far more intense.

Recent efforts by the state, counties and municipalities to work with the probation and parole officers in the community supervision system are laudable. The added resources proposed by Governor Corzine to fight gang activity are a step in the right direction in protecting ourselves from the lasting effects of crime on our communities.