

Stop stoking gravy train

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One of the most blatant examples of state government waste is the Victims of Crime Compensation Board, whose five "full-time" commissioners are paid \$107,000 to \$110,000 a year for what is a part-time job at best.

Blatant or not, nothing has been done to eliminate these patronage jobs since they were first exposed by the Press more than three years ago. Now, a bill to abolish the board and instead name five volunteers to serve for free on a panel hearing appeals in compensation cases is advancing in the Assembly. It's time to act.

The legislation (A-2322) is sponsored by Assemblymen Peter J. Barnes Jr., D-Middlesex, and Gordon M. Johnson, D-Bergen. A Senate version (S-1405) has been drafted by Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-Bergen. Lawmakers from Monmouth and Ocean counties should help provide the push needed for passage.

New Jersey is one of only two states that pays members of its victims compensation board. Volunteers can do the job just as well as part of a new Victims of Crime Compensation Agency. The staff does most of the work anyway.

The board also has been a poster child for the bloated state bureaucracy. Its members are paid handsome salaries for little or no work. Too often, their primary qualifications are the right political connections.

This was never more evident than during the tenure of former Marlboro Mayor Matthew V. Scannapieco, who joined the board in 1996 at the recommendation of former state Sen. John O. Bennett III, R-Monmouth. Scannapieco conceded in 2003 that he sought the compensation board seat because it allowed him to spend more time as Marlboro mayor. He retired from the board last March and pleaded guilty the next month to taking \$245,000 in bribes from a developer. He did not seek re-election as mayor in 2003.

A current commissioner, Jacob Toporek, told an Assembly committee last June that he took off 14 weeks in 2003 and 13 weeks in 2004 for family reasons or as "mental health days." The work must not be that demanding if a commissioner can take off that much time. His testimony prompted Barnes to call the board "a gravy train."

It still is. His bill should end that virtually free ride.