

Boot out victims board, critics say  
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The state Victims of Crime Compensation Board is a patronage mill run by three overpaid, chronically absent commissioners who should be fired immediately, victims' rights advocates and two lawmakers said Tuesday.

The critics, led by state Sen. Loretta Weinberg, D-Teaneck, urged support for a bill that calls for an executive director and a volunteer advisory board to replace current board members, who were paid \$109,000 to \$112,000 last year.

"It will be a statement by this Legislature that we are standing up to end political patronage in areas where jobs are not needed, where salaries are not appropriate," Weinberg said at a news conference at the Robert Treat Center in Newark, which houses the agency.

The four members of the board (a fifth seat is vacant) are responsible for dispensing millions of dollars each year to crime victims to cover everything from funeral expenses to chiropractor visits.

It has been under fire since last year, when Assembly hearings revealed persistent absenteeism by commissioners Jacob Toporek of Middlesex County, Lois Johnson of Morris County and Marianne McConnell.

Toporek, who served in Gov. Brendan T. Byrne's administration, took almost 320 vacation, sick and administrative leave days from 2000 to 2005, according to statistics compiled by Assemblyman Peter Barnes, D-Middlesex.

Johnson, former chairwoman of the Morris County Republican Organization, took 201 days off in that period.

McConnell has been off 123 days since she started at the board in 2002. She is the past president of the Women's Political Caucus of New Jersey.

"I was absolutely astounded that people could work for the state of New Jersey ... and not show up for work," said Barnes, who led the hearings last year.

Board Chairman Edward Werner, who was appointed to the panel in December, declined to comment on the bill or the news conference. The other commissioners did not return calls seeking comment.

One of the board's biggest critics is its former chairman, Richard Pompelio. He was credited with turning around the agency by getting rid of a 3,200-case backlog and giving out substantially more money during his two-year tenure.

The board needs three commissioners to approve the thousands of claims that come before the agency every year.

Since its founding in 1971, the board has provided more than \$145 million to more than 17,000 victims. The average award in recent years has been \$5,500. The maximum allowed is \$25,000. The money comes mostly from court fines collected from criminals.

Pompelio, a longtime crime-victim advocate whose son was killed in 1989, said the commissioners often bickered over claims that were clearly legitimate. He also said white victims often got preferential treatment and claims by black victims were questioned more often and took longer to pay.

"What we have right now are people who don't want to help victims," he said. "It is truly an unconscionable waste of the taxpayer's money to continue the present situation."

Kathy Garcia, who served as a member of the board's citizen advisory council, said, "I tried to advocate for victims and it was impossible to do. We need changes. Victims are not being served in this state."

Garcia said more crime victims should be board members.

The group praised Werner's three months on the job. His son was murdered in 1997.

The bill was passed by the Assembly last year, but stalled in the Senate. Last week it again was approved in committee and will soon be brought before the entire Assembly.

The bill would cut about \$448,000 from the agency, almost all of it the salaries and benefits of the commissioners, according to an analysis by the state Office of Legislative Services.

Under fire

Three of the four members of the state Victims of Crime Compensation Board have come under criticism for their salaries and absenteeism.

2005 compensation Number of days absent 2000-2005

Jacob Toporek \$112,429 319.7

Lois Johnson \$109,280 200.7

Marianne McConnell \$109,280 122.7\*

Edward Werner \$107,118 n/a\*\*

Source: State budget, Assemblyman Peter Barnes' staff.

\*Since 2002, when McConnell was appointed.

\*\*Appointed in December. One seat is vacant.

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### Money for victims

The Victims of Crime Compensation Board has 47 employees and a \$5.6 million budget. Money given to victims comes from fines collected by courts and charges at prison commissaries.

- \*2004: \$17.1 million
- 2003: \$13.3 million
- 2002: \$4.8 million

\* The latest year available.

Source: Victims of Crime Compensation Board