

Crime victims panel needs restructuring

Home News Tribune Online 03/10/06

New Jersey's Victims of Crime Compensation Board has long been one of the most egregious examples of an arm of government needlessly soaking the public.

The panel is a patronage pit. Incredibly, no credentials are necessary to qualify for a spot on the board. The only requirement for a seat at the table is a political connection, and what a lucrative connection that is: the board's five commissioners have been salaried since 1971; today, those individuals earn from \$107,000 to \$111,000 a year.

Worse, board members did their best to frustrate serious attempts at reform by previous Chairman Richard D. Pompelio, to the point that he was compelled to resign.

Pompelio earned well-deserved accolades for instituting changes that eliminated a backlog of 3,200 claims; reduced the average time to process a claim from approximately 21 months to 60 days; increased the dollar amounts paid to victims of crime from \$4.8 million in 2002 to \$13.3 million in 2003 and \$17.1 million in 2004, and upped the annual number of claims settled by 87 percent in 2003 and 120 percent in 2004.

Once Pompelio left, board members pushed to dismantle many of the advances the former chairman was able to bring about, succeeding in killing an outreach program for crime victims that had helped more than double the number of claims.

The list of board members' other sins is too lengthy to recite here. Suffice it to say that radical restructuring of the agency is long overdue — starting with elimination of the paid board positions in favor of volunteers.

There is no need for five full-time board members to oversee a department of 47 people. Members of comparable boards in many other states don't earn a dime for their service; their work is done entirely on a voluntary basis, out of a sense, one would imagine, of public duty. It should be no different here.

State Assemblyman Peter Barnes Jr., D-Middlesex, and state Sens. Loretta Weinberg, D-Bergen, and Ellen Karcher, D-Monmouth, have introduced nearly identical bills that would replace the five full-time paid board members at the Victims of Crime Compensation Board with a five-member volunteer board and one full-time executive director. The measures would rename the panel the Victims of Crime Hearing Board.

The Assembly and Senate should move the legislation forward as quickly as possible, so that Gov. Jon S. Corzine can sign it into law. The more than \$500,000 paid annually to board members is a thorough waste of taxpayers' money, while the ineffectiveness of the

panel is an affront to all victims of crime. New Jersey cannot afford or condone such waste.