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Penalties fail to mete justice

Posted by the Asbury Park Press on 04/18/06

A Rumson businessman was sentenced in January to four years in prison after what state officials called the biggest tax evasion case they ever brought. But he's already out of jail.

In Newark, a contractor who duped the government of millions only received probation. And he's not banned from obtaining future government contracts.

Sentences like these send a bad message to the public: White-collar crime can pay in New Jersey. Pretty well, too. The lenient treatment of those who ripped off the government and taxpayers demands immediate attention in the Legislature.

Michael Buonopane, 45, of Rumson served less than three months and was required to pay back the \$4,642,452 in federal and state taxes dating back to 1999. Plus he owes about a million in interest, but he has three years to come up with that. Buonopane could have done some wise investing of that money over the years and made out like the bandit that he is.

William C. Starling obtained nearly \$12 million in government jobs set aside for minority contractors in the mid-1990s, then subcontracted out the work, keeping 10 percent to 15 percent of the money. He fled to New Orleans — with \$150,000 in contract money — when he learned about the investigation. Last week, he received three years' probation. "I think nothing will be gained at this point by putting this man in jail," said U.S. District Judge Dennis M. Cavanaugh. But what about something called justice?

Cavanaugh also said he didn't bar Starling from future government work "because of his need to make restitution." So he could get more taxpayer money to pay back the taxpayer money he ripped off. Unbelievable.

Sentences like Buonopane's shouldn't be so easily cast aside, even with the Intensive Supervision

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Program he was assigned to after his release last week. Such early releases make a joke out of the sentence. Buonopane's release in less than three months — about 1/48th of his total sentence of three concurrent four-year terms — is despicable. Starling's sentence leaves us thunderstruck.

Sen. Joseph M. Kyrillos Jr., R-Monmouth, and Assemblyman Christopher J. Connors, R-Ocean, serve on the Senate and Assembly judiciary committees. They should work to introduce a bill that would tighten the state's sentencing and parole guidelines to prevent someone like Buonopane from walking out of jail so soon, and to put someone like Starling in prison.

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