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Bill links crime, loss of pension

By JONATHAN TAMARI
Gannett State Bureau

TRENTON

Public workers and elected officials convicted of corruption would face mandatory jail time and would lose their taxpayer-funded pension under a bill introduced Thursday.

The plan covers both public officials, such as senators and members of the Assembly, and rank-and-file employees.

"We must take these steps to punish corruption and deter future corruption," the plan's sponsor, Sen. John Adler, D-Cherry Hill, said.

Senate President Richard J. Codey, D-West Orange, and Sen. Ellen Karcher, D-Marlboro, Monmouth County, joined Adler in backing the plan.

But a spokesman for the state's largest public employee union said that while the group wants to see corruption eliminated, the measure could treat workers unfairly by requiring pension forfeiture without consideration of the circumstances of their crime.

"Because of the mandatory aspects of the proposed legislation, and because some of this is defined in a very, very broad way, some people who may have done something wrong, but not something so wrong that they should lose their pensions, could lose their retirement security," said Robert Master, political director of the Communications Workers of America regional office.

The bill lists 19 offenses that would mandate jail time and a loss of pension, including perjury, theft and bribery.

Since 2002, some 105 people have been indicted on, convicted of or pleaded guilty to corruption charges brought by U.S. Attorney Christopher Christie's office, according to Christie spokesman Michael Drewniak. The figure includes both public officials and others who attempted to influence government. Others have been charged under state law.

Gov. Jon S. Corzine and members of both parties have called for enhanced ethics rules and penalties for corruption.

"We need to send a clear message that we have zero tolerance for public corruption," Codey said. "The point here is, if you commit a crime of public corruption, you'll be doing time."

Adler's bill requires jail time ranging from one year to 10 years, depending on the crime. Prosecutors could ask a court to waive or reduce the jail time if a defendant cooperates in an investigation.

Public workers and elected officials convicted of corruption would also lose the pension tied to the job they used to commit the crime. They would not be required to forfeit pensions from other public jobs they hold in which there was no crime. Pension oversight panels could still impose additional penalties.

The new penalties would apply only to crimes committed after the bill takes effect.

"New Jersey may seem like a hotbed of corruption, but at least we're doing something about it," Karcher said.

Reach Jonathan Tamari at jtamari@gannett.com
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