

Under the Dome with DeAngelo

*An Update on the New Jersey State Government by Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo
(December 2016)*

Welcome Back Under the Dome where the halls and balconies are decorated for the holidays and Legislature and Executive Branches of New Jersey government are fully active before the brief winter break. This flurry of activity has seen a range of public policy measures under consideration ranging from making improvements to the judicial system to grants for businesses who work with military bases to requiring motorists to turn on their interior light when stopped by law enforcement.

One of the most impactful proposals recently put forward was by Senate President Sweeney to increase the number of judges throughout the state by 20. This bill would address the significant backlog of charged individuals awaiting pre-trial or trial hearings. According to a recent study conducted by Luminosity, almost 75 percent of jailed individuals in New Jersey are awaiting trial as opposed to serving a sentence; nearly 40 percent of the total jail population cannot afford bail while pre-trial inmates serve an average length of incarceration of more than 10 months.

Bail reforms signed into law by Governor Christie will go into effect in January 2017. These reforms include setting bail amounts based on risk factors to ensure that there is a fairness in setting bail. Dangerous, high-risk offenders would still be denied bail to keep the public safe during pre-trial. Supporters of the proposed legislation anticipate that increasing the number of jurists would be beneficial to ensuring the effectiveness of these reforms.

Another notable bill would assist the unemployed and underemployed acquire job skills by completing a year-long career and technical education certificate program. Funded by 10 percent of the Workplace Development Partnership program, the pilot program would help individuals with limited math, literacy or technical skills earn a career and technical certificate. The program would offer up to 20 industry-recognized certificates aimed at increasing the prospective employees changes in securing a job.

While these bills are working their way through the multi-step legislative process, several measures recently have been signed into law. Those new laws include, but are not limited to:

- Widening the distribution of critical Amber and Silver Alerts issued by the New Jersey State Police by increasing the number of state agencies sharing this information via social media platforms. The law also allows any other state, county, or local entities to share these alerts as they may choose. These social media alerts would may include, but are not limited to, description and recognizable photograph of the missing person as well as any other details of the potential abductor or disappearance.
- Creating a “one-stop shop” registry for veterans through a comprehensive online registry, to be maintained by the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, that is listing of veterans’ organizations that provide a range of helpful services.
- Allowing retired special law enforcement officers, under age 65, to provide part-time security at public school districts or colleges. These officers will work in tandem with traditional, full-time officers and will be under the authority of local chiefs of police.

- Permitting veterans to apply for unemployment benefits online. Previously, veterans claiming UI benefits who worked for the federal government or outside the State were required to apply in-person or via the telephone. This law makes it easier for benefits to be obtained as other applicants can file online as well.
- Forgiving student debt in tragic cases when the borrower dies. The applicable loans would have been issued by the state higher Education Student Assistance Authority such as NJCLASS loans. The borrower, as well as a parent or guardian who co-signed the loan, will be discharged of obligation. The law also will allow for deferment in case where the borrower is totally and permanently disabled. Deferment of loan principal and interest also will be allowed in cases of temporary total disability.
- Suspending mortgage and property tax payments for mobilized National Guard members and Reservists. The law will defer mortgage payments for 60 days after release or separation from federal active duty; deferment of property tax payments will expire 90 days after such release or separation. According to the New Jersey Department of Military and Veterans Affairs, an estimated 1,000 National Guard members were scheduled to be deployed in 2015 to locations including Afghanistan, Albania, Germany, Kosova, Kuwait, Quatar and areas under responsibilities under United State Central Command. This law eases the financial burden on military members and their families during deployment.
- Expanding the New Jersey Energy Star Homes Program throughout the entire state as opposed to just certain areas of the state. Under the program, incentives offered through the Board of Public Utilities for residential construction projects that achieve an additional 15 percent energy efficiency than required under building code.

Both House of the Legislature will continue to work through the month of December and will reconvene in January. It is likely that, as traditional during the winter legislative session, many more issues will be heard that will be a direct impact to the people of New Jersey.

I wish all those celebrating this month a very Happy Holiday season and I will see you back in in the New Year 2017!

Editor's Note: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo (D-Hamilton) represents the 14th Legislative District which includes parts of Mercer and Middlesex counties. He can be reached at AsmDeAngelo@njleg.org; phone (609) 631-7501; www.WayneDeAngelo.com; Facebook: Assemblyman Wayne DeAngelo; or Twitter: @DeAngeloLD14.