

Police group defends county spending on overtime

WHITE PLAINS - A leading law-enforcement group is defending taxpayer-funded overtime for county corrections and police officers, noting in a statement that "crime has no schedule."

The Westchester Chapter of the National Black Police Association also maintained in a press release issued yesterday that increased law enforcement presence, regardless of the ultimate cost, is vital in the post-9/11 world.

The group was reacting to reports in The Journal News this week that Westchester spent \$32 million on overtime pay last year, with correction and police officers taking the top 20 spots on the list of highest paid county workers.

"Unfortunately, crime does not occur during typical work hours," Damon Jones, executive director of the association's Westchester chapter, said in the statement.

Jones, a county correction officer, also maintained that the newspaper's reports put officers "under an unnecessary microscope" that "does not solve the budgetary problems, personnel shortages, low morale in the profession."

Jones did not return telephone calls and an e-mail seeking additional comments yesterday.

In a report Sunday, The Journal News noted that the county police and correction departments accounted for more than \$121 million of the \$399 million in salaries and overtime paid out by the county last year. The Department of Correction accounted for \$86.4 million in pay, giving it the highest payroll of any county agency.

Correction Sgt. Ronald Hubbard was Westchester's top earner in 2007 with \$288,381 in total pay - \$181,783 of it in extra pay. Correction Commissioner Joseph Spano said that included overtime, \$10,000 in longevity and night differential pay, and \$37,000 in retroactive pay from the overdue settlement of a union contract.

The county's second highest-paid worker was county Police Officer Gerardo Gizzo, who took home \$248,562 in total pay. Public Safety Commissioner Thomas Belfiore said that included \$10,000 in contracted holiday pay and \$20,900 in rollover pay from 2006. Gizzo was the county's top earning employee in 2006.

All told, the two law-enforcement agencies accounted for the top 20 spots on the list of highest-paid county workers. Those officers totaled a combined \$3.85 million in take-home pay, including \$1.8 million in overtime, according to records obtained under state Freedom of Information law.

The records list all 7,869 county workers in 2007, which includes 5,579 full-time workers. The other employees are part-time or seasonal staff, such as summer workers at the county-owned Playland Amusement Park in Rye.

County officials said they have cut payroll costs this year by \$4.5 million, including an anticipated \$2 million reduction in overtime costs for correction officers and \$800,000 in overall cuts in the Department of Public Safety.

"Law-enforcement workers have worked diligently over the years to maintain law and order in the county," Jones said in his statement. "It is unfair to deny them overtime after their hard work and sacrifices, and (it is) dangerous for the county to cut the overtime budget for law-enforcement professionals."

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