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Lawmaker: More cops, not more laws, needed to fight gangs



Written by

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All the "feel-good, anti-gang legislation in the world" can't replace police on the streets in fighting gang crime, the state's Senate president said Tuesday.

Democrat Stephen M. Sweeney called on Senate Republicans who want to fast-track pending anti-gang legislation to attend a hearing Monday of the Senate's Law and Public Safety Committee. There, he said, they can discuss how law enforcement can combat gangs when the ranks of the criminals are on the rise and the roster of cops is falling.

"You can pass all the crime bills you want," said Sweeney, D-Gloucester, "but if police officers aren't there, what can you do? Gangs will go where they feel they won't get caught. They will venture out where they think they will be successful. "

After the State Police said last week in a report that criminal gangs have broadened their base in New Jersey, a trio of senators,

including state Sen. Sean T. Kean, R-Monmouth, called on Senate leadership to consider all anti-gang bills.

"I don't believe that just because we have personnel cutbacks that we don't deal with this epidemic," said Kean, who is joined in his efforts by Sens. Thomas Kean Jr., R-Union, and Anthony Bucco, R-Morris.

Sweeney said the ranks of police statewide are down 11 percent from a year ago. Police lost to layoffs or retirement were not replaced because towns didn't have the money. With a 2 percent tax cap now in place, budgets will be further strained — and further cuts likely, he added.

"If they want to talk about how to get Gov. (Chris) Christie to talk about funding municipalities again, let's do that," Sweeney said. "Bring mayors, bring victims of crime to our hearing Monday."

Added Sweeney: "No one would ever have dreamed that Monmouth County would rank second in the state for gangs. No

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one."

Christie's spokesman Mike Drewniak said the State Police gang report "brought into focus" that gangs aren't only "an urban problem. . . . It's spread. They are opportunists."

Drewniak said that from 2002 to 2008, when Christie served as U.S. Attorney for New Jersey, "we witnessed the recruitment of college students to buy guns. College students would use their own IDs to buy guns in, for example, Ohio, and then (the guns) would find their way back to New Jersey."

The governor will "take a careful look after passage in both houses" of any anti-gang laws, Drewniak said.

Peter Aseltine, spokesman for State Attorney General Paula Dow, said she is "making use of every law enforcement tool available" and "would welcome any efforts by the Legislature to assist us in this fight."

Nationally, anti-gang efforts follow a four-pronged attack, said Whitney Tymas, manager of the gangs and guns violence prosecution program for the National District Attorneys Association, Alexandria, Va.

That focuses on prevention, intervention, suppression and transitions from prison back into society, Tymas said. "One single approach is not going to work."

A relatively new tool for police is the use of

civil injunctions, which prevent gang members from associating in public, Tymas said. By keeping gangs from congregating in a defined geographic area, both intimidation of the public and recruitment of children can be reduced.

Arlen Egley, senior research associate at the National Gang Center, an arm of the U. S. Department of Justice, said that while civil injunctions do seem to "show the public feels better," the process of making them work is "quite detailed."

"Police have to gather a roster" of gang members, Egley said, "identify them, then serve everyone." Where such injunctions are being used — California, Florida, Texas, Minnesota and Tennessee — "there's a lot of support for them."

Egley, who read the New Jersey State Police gang survey, said its findings offered "a lot of parallels to the national data. . . . New areas are seeing an emergence of gang activity."

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But, Egley said before a community engages in the problem of gangs, "it often takes a gruesome event — a drive-by shooting where a child gets caught in the crossfire or a police officer shot."

Sweeney pointed to the shooting death of Lakewood Police Officer Christopher Matlosz last month as such an event — and noted that the suspect in the shooting was caught two days later in Camden, where recent police layoffs have made national news. Lakewood and Camden are seen by members of law enforcement as centers for gang activity.

"Let's not give false hope to people by passing gang bills, if you don't have cops on the street to enforce laws," Sweeney said.

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