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## Essex County Bar Offers Bulk Rate To Recruit Public-Sector Lawyers

By Henry Gottlieb

Getting government lawyers in New Jersey to join bar associations has always been a tough sell when their agencies don't pay for memberships.

It doesn't make sense to invest \$100 or so in dues when there's no economic reason to schmooze with colleagues and judges or attend seminars, these salaried lawyers reason.

But what if the dues were cheap? Really cheap.

The Essex County Bar Association is testing that tactic this month by offering bargain-basement dues — \$30 a year for county prosecutors and public defenders — as part of a drive to attract adherents to the 2,700-member

organization.

There's a catch. All 180 lawyers in the two offices must join to put the deal into effect, Bar President Marc Gross told representatives of the agencies during a sales pitch on Nov. 2.

Gross isn't commenting on whether he would be an uncompromising meanie if a few hardcore holdouts declined to join. He's clear, though, about his underlying hope.

"Lawyers in the public sector have been underrepresented in our association and our goal is to change that dramatically," says Gross, of Greenbaum, Rowe, Smith & Davis in Roseland.

Wooling these lawyers is part of an

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PHOTO BY CARMEN NATALE



**LET'S MAKE A DEAL:** Essex Bar President Marc Gross says justice system lawyers would enrich the life of the association, not just its revenue.

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aggressive drive by the Essex Bar to increase membership by 10 percent a year for the next three years — a boost most New Jersey bars would relish at a time of dwindling participation in professional societies of all kinds.

Gross says getting the justice system lawyers would enrich the life of the association, not just add \$5,000 in revenue or payments for programs the new members might attend.

"The more members we get from various practice areas and various perspectives, the better off we all are," he says.

Right now, a scant dozen of the 180 lawyers in Essex County's criminal justice system are in the county Bar, so signing them all would get Gross halfway to his 10 percent goal for the year.

Gross says his approach to signing government lawyers by offering a drastically reduced bulk rate is a first by a county association and bar leaders throughout the state say he's probably right. They are curious to see how the idea fares.

Gross says the Bar is able to offer a low group rate because adding these members doesn't add to monthly mailing costs, one of the largest items in any professional association's budget.

The once-a-month packet of notices and publications each bar member receives would be delivered in bulk to the public defenders' and prosecutors' offices from the Bar's new headquarters in the Essex County Courthouse.

The basic rate for Essex County Bar

membership is \$195, and public sector lawyers now get a 25 percent discount. A \$30 rate would be an 85 percent discount. Gross says other public sector lawyers, such as those in the county counsel's office, are likely to be offered the low rate on the same all-or-none basis.

The State Bar Association and most county bars offer discounts of 20 percent or more for public-sector lawyers on the theory that these attorneys have less to spend than private colleagues and fewer benefits to gain from membership in associations dominated by civil practitioners.

Several county prosecutors' offices pay for their attorneys' dues, but not Essex, the largest in the state, where it would be a \$20,000 budget item.

Prosecutor Paula Dow, who says five or 10 of her 140 attorneys are members now, says she thinks the Bar's idea is a good one and that she is urging her people to join.

"I'm hoping I get a good turnout," Dow says. "I know I won't get 100 percent because I know there is always a curmudgeon or two out there," she says.

Last Thursday, after a week of being cajoled, 31 of the 42 lawyers in the public defender's office signed up, a big jump from the three already in the association, according to Deputy Assistant Public Defender Susan Freedman.

Freedman says some magnanimous lawyers in the office pledged to pay more than \$30 to make up for colleagues who won't join.

"If I have one or two who just refuse for whatever reason — and I'm sure there



APPROVATE Susan Freedman is recruiting her colleagues in the public defender's office for bar membership.

PHOTO BY CARMEN NATALE

will be plenty of reasons offered — we're going to cover everyone," she says.

Freedman, a county Bar trustee and a former co-chair of the criminal bench-bar committee, says the association will make a significant effort to be relevant to criminal justice lawyers by sponsoring programs that interest them.

If the Supreme Court adopts a proposal to make continuing legal education mandatory in New Jersey, Essex Bar seminars on criminal law would be of use to the county justice system lawyers.

The state public defender's office has such seminars, but lawyers in Newark would probably rather pay for a Bar seminar at the member-discount rate than travel to Trenton, Freedman says. She says getting prosecutors and public defenders to meet in social and professional settings would also improve collegiality between the two offices, which

seems to have declined in recent years, she says.

A random sample of membership rates in other New Jersey bar groups suggests that an 85 percent reduction for government lawyers is huge.

The Morris County Bar, which has one of the more generous offerings to public sector lawyers, charges them \$75 a year, compared with \$160 for private attorneys. The discount was instituted last year at the urging of immediate past President Robert McAndrew, who has a firm in Morristown.

Government lawyers admitted to practice in 2001 or before pay \$143 dues to belong to the State Bar Association, compared with \$192 for private attorneys with similar experience.

In Camden County, where private attorneys admitted to practice for three or more years pay \$80 to \$170, all public lawyers pay \$80 to belong to the Bar Association.

Public sector lawyers in Hudson County pay \$90, compared with \$135 for most lawyers in private practice.

In Bergen County, public sector lawyers' dues of \$100 are \$55 less than the basic rate. For the 60 prosecutors, the deal is even better, because the county pays the dues. Prosecutor John Molinelli is a fan of the county Bar, which is not surprising because he was its president in 2005.

He says participation would be high even if the county did not pay the dues because attorneys in the office realize there are benefits to interacting with members of the private bar and attending Bar programs.

He says three or four of the Bar's committees are co-chaired by assistants in his office.

Linda Lawhun, an assistant prosecutor in Cumberland County who is a former county bar president, says her office also pays for attorneys' memberships. "It's important for us to be part of the larger community of lawyers." ■