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Politics

N.J. is one of two states to promote troopers based on supervisors' opinions

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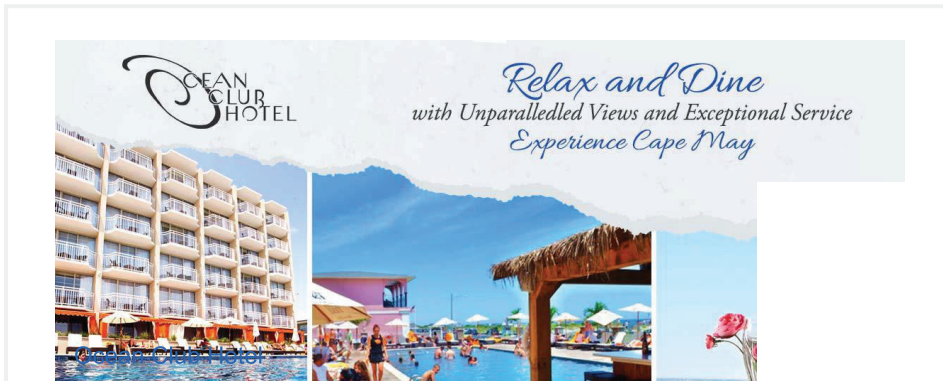
By [Christopher Baxter | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)**Tom Wright-Piersanti/The Star-****Ledger**

An New Jersey State Police car is pictured in this file photo. New Jersey and Rhode Island are the only two statewide law enforcement agencies in the country to rely almost entirely on the opinion of supervisors for promotions, a practice most discarded years ago in favor of more objective written and verbal exams.

TRENTON — The State Police are one of only two statewide law enforcement agencies in the country to rely almost entirely on the opinion of supervisors for promotions, a practice most discarded years ago in favor of more objective written and verbal exams.

A Star-Ledger survey found that the Rhode Island State Police, with a force a fraction the size of New Jersey's, was the only other to use such a subjective system. But even there, one high-ranking official said he is expecting changes.

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“The topic of testing for promotion is bouncing back around again, and I think it will be revisited,” said Maj. Wilfred Hill. “To be quite frank, everyone here knows who the slugs are, who the workers are, the go-getters. I can’t fathom this system on a job the size of New Jersey.”

Other states surveyed use structured, scenario-based interviews, written exams or verbal exams, called oral “boards,” to assess rank-and-file candidates seeking supervisory jobs. Many use a combination and have done so for many years.

As it stands in New Jersey, State Police supervisors at several levels meet and rank troopers eligible for promotion to middle management on a scale of 1 to 100, taking into consideration education, years of service, experience, performance and employee evaluations.

But there are no interviews or objective scoring, which many say leaves the state vulnerable to lawsuits by troopers claiming they were wrongly passed over for promotion.

'WORTH A DISCUSSION'

The state Attorney General's Office defends the practice as effective and efficient. A spokesman for the office, Paul Loriquet, stressed that troopers are evaluated on a predetermined set of criteria and that tests do not necessarily measure leadership.

Asked why the State Police, which has about 2,700 troopers, used a system unlike most other states, Loriquet said implementing some form of exam was “worth a discussion.” He also noted the State Police are accredited by a nationally recognized commission that reviews, among other things, promotions.

The State Police does not make public any promotion policies or procedures, citing a rule approved last year by the Attorney General's Office making such information confidential. The American Civil Liberties Union of New Jersey last week sued for the promotion materials.

Former New Jersey Attorney General John Farmer Jr., who implemented a promotion exam that was later discarded, said promoting rank-and-file troopers to supervisory positions required a "whole different skill set" that past performance and evaluations do not necessarily measure.

"Having something that measures people is probably good policy for the state and for the State Police," said Farmer, who served from 1999 to 2002.

MULTIPLE EVALUATIONS

A combination of written exams and oral boards is generally accepted as the best practice nationwide, said Rick Jacobs, a psychology professor at Penn State University and chief executive officer of EB Jacobs, which creates promotion tests for police agencies.

"I'm surprised that there's no form of formal testing in New Jersey," Jacobs said. "Generally people who are good as troopers can move into supervisory positions, but it's not guaranteed. That's why we do these kinds of tests."

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Implementing more objective criteria does not reduce the number of lawsuits filed alleging bias because “everyone likes to think they're promotable material,” he said. But they do generally give police agencies more firepower in court to counter a challenge.

In most states, written exams determine candidates' knowledge of laws and agency rules and regulations. Verbal exams require troopers to respond on-the-spot to management scenarios. Some states also use hands-on assessments, like reviewing police reports for errors.

Most troopers are then ranked, and top brass selects from that list.

“Our system works pretty well,” said David Latimer, executive director of the South Carolina Troopers Association. “It's not perfect. I don't think there is a perfect system. But it seems to be fair.”

Fred Rice, chairman of the Idaho State Police Association, said even with tests, the final decision comes down to judgment — and that's generally a good thing.

“You can have the best fit to be your new sergeant, but if he has a bad day in front of a panel, he doesn't get promoted,” Rice said.

“There's pros and cons to everything that's out there. The main thing is to be consistent. If it's consistent, people will buy into it.”



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