

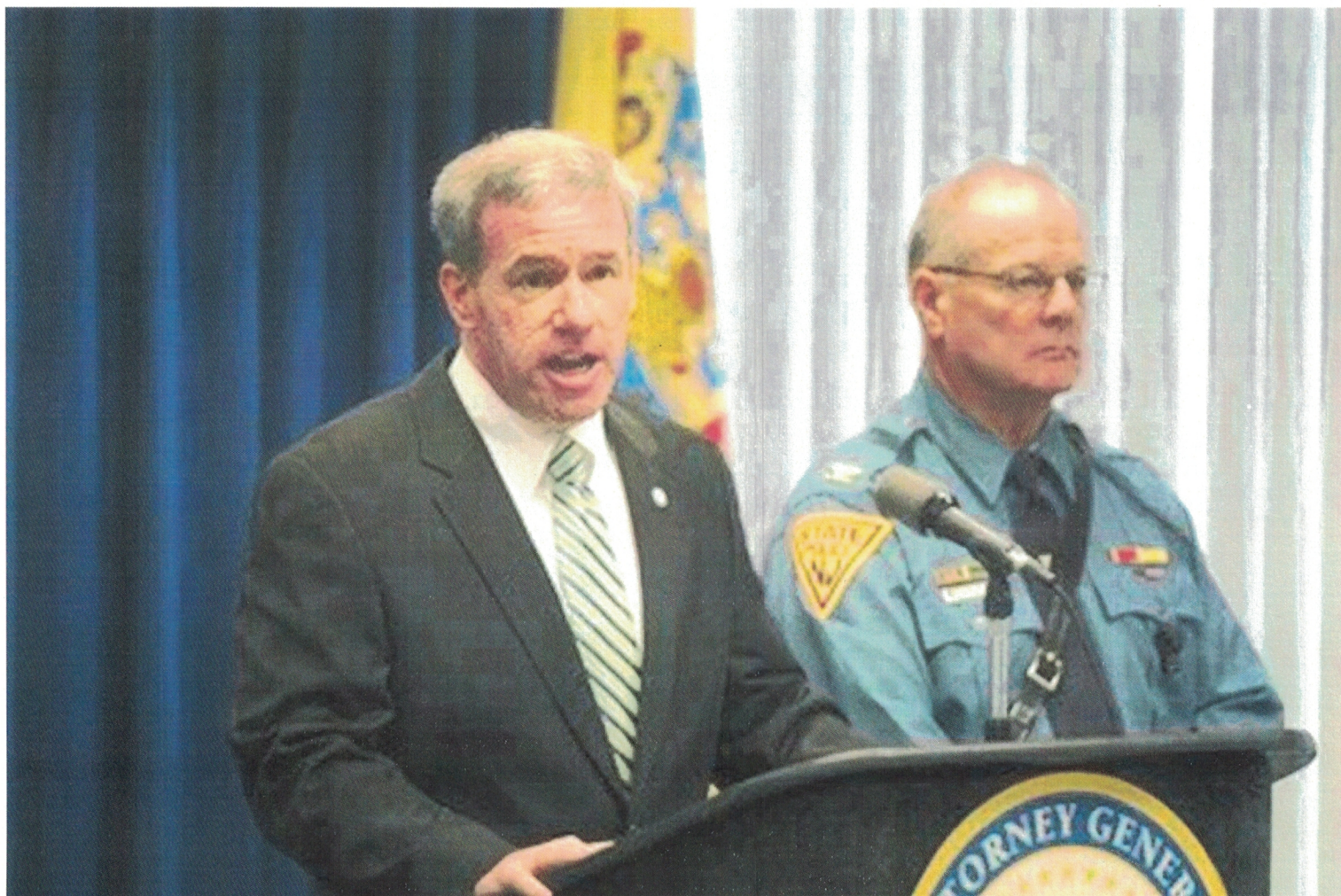
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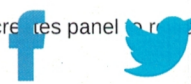
Politics

# N.J. Attorney General creates panel to review State Police promotion process

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N.J. Attorney General Jeffrey Chiesa has created a panel to review the State Police promotion process. The panel will be made up of representatives from the State Police, the Attorney General's Office, and the State Police Association. The panel will report back to the Attorney General by the end of the year.



By [Christopher Baxter | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)

TRENTON — New Jersey Attorney General Jeffrey Chiesa has created a panel to review the State Police promotion process after a survey found the statewide force was one of only two in the nation to rely almost entirely on the opinions of supervisors.

The panel will “look at the promotional process and system, which may include written examinations as one of the components along the way as part of the whole process,” said Paul Loriquet, a spokesman for Chiesa.

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“We consider promotion based on merit and operational need,” Loriquet said.

Promotions are highly prized within the State Police, allowing troopers to gain salary, pension and responsibility.

Currently, State Police supervisors at several levels meet and rank troopers eligible for promotion 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 as retaliation for speaking up about problems or wrongdoing.

A Star-Ledger survey in September found nearly every other state uses structured interviews, written exams or verbal exams, called oral “boards,” to assess rank-and-file candidates seeking supervisory jobs.

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, the newspaper's survey found, and one high-ranking official there said he expected a test to be implemented.

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A day after the results of the survey were published, Gov. Chris Christie said he wanted to learn more about the process.

Loriquet said there was no timeframe for Chiesa's panel, which includes representatives of the attorney general and State Police, to reach a conclusion or report its recommendations.



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About once a year, a list of candidates for promotion is forwarded from the State Police to the attorney general for review.

This process in the past led to tension between the two sides because, unlike in most states, the Attorney General's Office in New Jersey directly oversees the State Police and has the upper hand on many of the division's decisions.

Attorneys general have historically used promotion denials as a way to keep problem troopers from rising in the ranks.

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That tension has again emerged under Chiesa.

Last month, two unions — the State Troopers Fraternal Association and the State Troopers Non-Commissioned Officers Association — sued Chiesa after he ordered Superintendent Col. Rick Fuentes to strip five troopers of their temporary titles.

In the lawsuit, filed in U.S. District Court in Trenton, the unions allege Fuentes disagreed with the order but nonetheless removed the troopers in February from their acting positions and “blacklisted” them from future promotion.

The State Police assign troopers acting titles to preserve the chain of command until promotions are handed out. After eight pay periods, troopers with acting titles earn salary for the higher rank until promotion or the assignment is ended.

The unions said none of the troopers — Sgt. 1st Class Dewey Bookholdt, Trooper John Cardini, Trooper Lance Moorehouse, Trooper Neal Picillo and Trooper Erik Ruczynski — was given an explanation for the demotions or allowed to contest them.

“The obvious implication for the demotions is that they have done something very wrong,” the lawsuit said, adding that the troopers’ reputations among their colleagues had been damaged after the changes were published internally.

Court documents do not detail if the troopers have any past misconduct that might have caused them to be demoted.

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The unions have asked that the troopers’ higher ranks be reinstated until they get a proper hearing, which they believe is required under their negotiated labor contracts. Representatives of the unions did not return calls for comment.

In response to the claims, the Attorney General’s Office said in court documents

The office also dismissed accusations that Fuentes disagreed with the order or that a promotional “blacklist” exists.

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On May 9, U.S. District Judge Peter Sheridan denied the unions' request for a preliminary injunction and found the claims being made should be handled through the promotion and grievance process outlined in their labor contracts.

The five troopers in question were rejected from the most recent round of promotions, which was completed last fall. Loriguet said the Attorney General's Office received the full list of candidates in May and completed its review three months later, in August.

He said the list was then sent to Christie's office for a one-month review before being finalized.

A second set of approximately 300 candidates is now under review by Chiesa, Loriguet said.

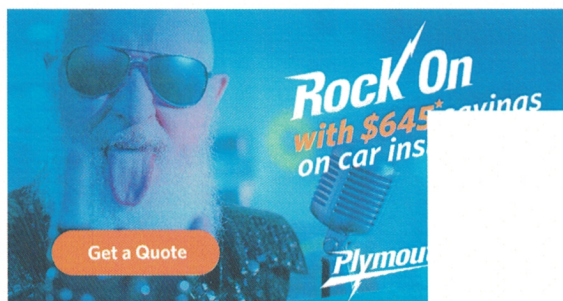
"We look at conduct on and off duty, and we look into any serious complaints that are substantiated, which might include domestic violence, DWI use of force and candor," Loriguet said. "We also look at any negative performance evaluations."

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He said Chiesa is "very involved" in the process, but declined to comment on the unions' lawsuit.

At an Assembly budget hearing earlier this month, Assemblyman Vincent Prieto (D-Hudson) told Chiesa he had heard the promotion process was taking a long time to complete, causing troopers to remain in acting titles.

“I try to do the best I can to make sure the promotions are moving at a responsible pace,” Chiesa said.

Four years ago, the State Police unions waged a prolonged battle against former Attorney General Anne Milgram, claiming she was too aggressive in denying promotions to troopers and digging too deep into disciplinary records. An arbitrator upheld Milgram’s right to deny promotions.

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