

Public Safety Professions Deserve Our Respect, Support

By Senator Pete Campos

The first responsibility of government, at any level, is to protect the health, safety and welfare of its citizens. At the federal level, this responsibility falls on agencies ranging from the Department of Defense to the Homeland Security Department. At the state level, we rely on the men and women of the Department of Public Safety and the Corrections Department to protect us from harm.

These courageous protectors take jobs and assume risks that most of us would never dream of performing. They work long hours, including at night and on weekends when we're enjoying time with our families. They keep themselves in good physical condition so they can meet the rigors of their jobs. They risk personal injury and even death, faithfully reporting to work knowing that each day could be their last.

New Mexico state police officers, motor transportation officers, correctional officers, and game and fish officers all deserve our respect and support. Each truly does work to "protect and serve" us.

We must continue at the state level to ensure that these public safety professionals are fairly and appropriately compensated for the jobs they do and the risks they take. The New Mexico Legislature has made good strides toward this obligation. Correctional officers now have a 20-year retirement plan, affording them the same retirement benefits as state police officers, that is better than most state employees' plans. The legislature also expanded the number of state police officers who are eligible for the more generous retirement plan, recognizing the risks that are also taken by police lieutenants and captains.

We also restored collective bargaining rights for law enforcement, correctional and other public employees.

This year, the legislature approved a five percent pay raise for state police officers — which is significantly more than the 1.75 percent approved for other state workers — and we appropriated \$1 million to buy radios, protective vests and other safety equipment for correctional officers. Unfortunately, a measure that would have provided correctional officers a \$3.50-an-hour raise failed to win approval this year, but the legislature has not

allowed its commitment to properly compensate public safety professionals to wane.

One of the most difficult jobs in the legislature is balancing the various competing demands for deserving initiatives. Each year the requests for funding far outstrip the available revenue. Our job as legislators is to take a balanced approach that adequately funds deserving initiatives without burdening taxpayers. We've done that with our public safety professionals and we will continue to monitor their compensation and benefits to ensure that it is commensurate with the critical public safety duties that these men and women perform.