

He's been in law enforcement for nearly 50 years, and he's not talking retirement

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*Samuel J. Plumeri, Jr., Chairman of the New Jersey State Parole Board, in his Trenton office.
Michael Mancuso | NJ Advance Media*

By [Kevin Shea | For NJ.com](#)

Samuel J. Plumeri Jr.'s spacious office at the New Jersey State Parole Board in Trenton is filled with pictures and mementos that document his nearly 50 years in law enforcement.

It would be easy for him to regale anyone with war stories from his career, which ranges from his days as an undercover narcotics officer on the streets of Trenton in the 1970s, to fighting terrorism as the leader of the Port Authority of NY/NJ Police Department in the decade after 9/11.

But Plumeri wants to talk recidivism, keeping people out of prison, and what it's like to now lead a sometimes under appreciated cog in the criminal justice system: the part social worker, part cop that is a parole officer.

Plumeri could retire, now – he's way past the usual 30-year mark for law enforcement officers. But he won't. He loves his role, and loves working.

He guides his career with advice from his father - Samuel J. Plumeri Sr., who brought baseball back to Trenton in the early 1990s as the first owner of the Trenton Thunder minor league team - who often said:

“If you're still relevant, you're not ridiculous.”

Plumeri has stayed relevant, he says, by immersing himself in the details of parole, and how it's administered in the Garden State.

He admits he was a somewhat of a novice about the agency's work when he was named to the board about a decade ago, first as an associate member, then rising to vice chairman. He was named acting chairman before finally being permanently named to the post earlier this year.

As a police officer in Trenton - he got his badge in 1970 - and later as Mercer County Sheriff, “We didn't look at parole at all like they way they look at it today,” Plumeri said.

As a narcotics officer, Plumeri wanted to seize as many drugs as possible, make as many arrests as he could. “It was all numbers back then,” he said. And he's sure he made at times back then a common blunder: confusing probation, a non-custodial sentence, with parole, the early release of a prisoner with conditions.

Now, Plumeri talks with zeal about all the work the agency does. He recites the layered approach to granting parole, then how officers do their best to monitor parolees, and how officers work to make sure parolees get what they need, drug and addiction treatment to counseling and even resume writing.

“I just enjoy the good work that this agency does,” Plumeri said.

Parole officers have evolved a lot since the late 1980s, when they were part of the New Jersey Department of Corrections, were not sworn law enforcement officers and did not carry firearms. And they had no union.



They added all that in the late 80s and throughout the 1990s, and by the early 2000s, legislation broke them away from the Corrections Department and they became their own autonomous agency. Nearly 400 parole officers supervise a parole population of over 15,000.

As the agency added more of the police to their job, though, conventional thought might be that they are making more arrests, or sending people back to prison.

Not so, Plumeri says, pulling a sheet of numbers from his desk.

Parole board numbers show parole revocations have decreased from about 4,000 a year in 2000 to under 2,000 in 2009, and now hover at about 1,600.

The numbers show that while the statewide prison population shrink from nearly 29,000 inmates in 2000 to about 19,000 last year, the parole population has increased, from about 12,000 parolees two decades ago, to about 15,400 in 2018.

And Plumeri said recidivism in New Jersey - the number of parolees who reoffend within three years of release - is 30 to 31, while nationwide was [68 percent nationwide](#).

Parole officers and the agency have done this while doing more cop-like things, like joining fugitive task forces, and partnering with law enforcement around the state. But they continue to be social workers too, Plumeri said.

"The (agency) is often misunderstood, overlooked, and they have done a great things," Plumeri said. The agency has been accredited in his tenure, and re-accredited. "I am very proud of that," he said.

Thomas Lambert, president of the parole officers police union, said Plumeri's influence on the agency is no lip service.

Lambert said the agency, which has been dogged in the past as parking spot for political patronage, has benefitted from Plumeri's longtime career as a police officer, sheriff and law enforcement executive.

"He's brought a unique perspective, and he's been extremely insightful for us," Lambert said. "He learned the job," he said.

Others before him did not, Lambert said. "He's no political figurehead - he wants to know everything that's going on. He's very intense on how we're dealing with parolees, and and he's relentless, in a good way."

Lambert said said Plumeri recently solved what others might delegate - the agency ordered the wrong gun holsters - and he got involved so it would not become an issue with officers. "He fixed it right away."



Also important, Plumeri and Lambert have a good, working relationship, which not always the case with police union leaders, who are often the public counterbalance to police administration policies or politicians.

“We have a voice with him, and he’s kinda like a Yoda - he gives me his unbiased opinion,” Lambert said.

Plumeri said he will continue to do so, as long as he’s relevant to the board.

“I’m just happy - happy to be a part of it.”