

NEWS RELEASE

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**GOVERNOR SIGNS LAW TO CRACK DOWN ON DRUG DEALERS
WITH GUNS**

Gov. Christie Whitman today toured Somerset County Jail and signed a tough new law that cracks down on drug dealers who use guns by hitting them with stiffer penalties and longer prison terms. The Governor called for the expanded penalties during her State of the State address in January.

The bill (A-1848) creates a new offense category to recognize the severity of the crime and doubles the maximum penalty - to up to ten years -- for carrying a gun while committing a drug offense.

"These strengthened penalties send a clear message: if you sell drugs and possess firearms, you will pay for it with a long prison sentence," Gov. Whitman said. "I am firmly resolved to making crime as painful as possible for the criminals - especially drug dealers."

Currently, drug dealers in possession of a weapon are typically charged with third or fourth-degree crimes. The new law makes committing a drug offense while in possession of a fire arm other weapons a second degree crime. Among the drug offenses covered by the law are being the leader of a drug trafficking network; maintaining or operating a controlled dangerous substance production facility; and manufacturing, distributing, or dispensing a controlled dangerous substance.

A second degree offense carries a prison sentence of between 5 and 10 years and a fine of \$150,000.

The bill was sponsored by Assemblyman James Holzapfel (R- Monmouth/Ocean), Assemblyman Peter Barnes (D-Middesex), Senator Norman Robertson (R-Essex/ Passaic) and Senator Diane Allen (R-Burlington/Camden).