

Commentary

Freelancers Are Out Because of Trenton

Last Friday was a difficult day at *The Westfield Leader/Times*, as we were forced to discontinue our freelance program for reporters and photographers. The State of New Jersey's Labor Department has told us that freelancers are employees and fined our publisher going back to 2015.

Our freelancers are members of the community. They are moms and dads who enjoy writing or taking pictures. Some of our staff have day jobs, while some have small children, and so covering evening municipal meetings works perfectly into their busy schedules. They are paid per assignment and submit monthly invoices.

Our writers include Fred Rossi, who has covered Scotch Plains since the late 1990s; Christina Hinke, our Westfield and Cranford reporter as well as our Arts & Entertainment editor; Kim Broadwell, who started around the same time and who has covered Mountainside and Fanwood; our Garwood reporter, Michael Bonaccorso; our theater critic and photographer, Susan Dougherty, sports writer Alex Lowe and photographer Paul Lachenauer.

Being forced to eliminate our freelance staff of writers and photographers will cause us to significantly reduce our coverage of town council, planning board, board of education and recreation commission meetings as well as our high school sports coverage.

The Phil Murphy Administration has decided to aggressively pursue what they say are companies using independent contractors to avoid paying taxes and employee benefits. Nothing could be further from the truth. Freelancers take assignments based on their own schedules. Some are available for more assignments than others. Switching to W2's would require us to take deductions from their

paychecks as well as increased company costs we have to match in areas like Social Security and unemployment insurance. Would they have to be paid on an hourly basis? How would we calculate that, as a typical meeting can run from a half hour to several hours? This is purely about Trenton politicians wanting money to pay for the free-for-all spending of the Phil Murphy Administration. Gov. Murphy has spent billions more than Governor Chris Christie.

In reviewing the independent contractor law, it was our understanding that Democrats in Trenton were really after big fish like Walmart, not a small business like *The Westfield Leader/Times* that dates back to 1890. We have published despite several fires in our building and even during a power failure caused by Superstorm Sandy. And as many know, these are difficult times for print newspapers, as advertising revenue has been shrinking while costs such as postal fees are rising.

We need Trenton to get out of our way and allow us to serve our readers as we have been doing for nearly 130 years. Ending our freelance program will have a negative impact on our coverage. In this regard, we ask for the community's help in submitting pictures and articles on local events.

Those who would like to help our cause can do so by calling their state lawmakers as follows: District 21 (Westfield, Cranford, Garwood and Mountainside), Senator Tom Kean, (908) 232-3673 and Assembly members Jon Bramnick, (908) 232-2073, and Nancy Munoz, (908) 918-0414; District 22, Senator Nick Scutari, (908) 587-0404 and Assembly members James Kennedy, (732) 943-2660, and Linda Carter (908) 561-5757 (Scotch Plains and Fanwood).

Thank you to our freelance staff for your efforts over the years and thank you to our loyal subscribers and advertisers for your support.

Hopefully, Trenton will come to their senses at the 11th hour and exempt journalists from the independent contractor law so we continue the community coverage our readers count on every week.

