

Probation can reduce prison overcrowding

By Vincent J. Iaria
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In September, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed a package of prison reforms that included building more prisons, improving infrastructure, creating secure community-based re-entry centers and moving nonviolent women out of prisons and into community-based facilities. These proposals were the centerpiece of a special legislative session called to address prison overcrowding in California.

In the end, these proposals were not included in the final 2006-07 bond and budget measures passed by the Legislature. In response, Gov. Schwarzenegger issued an emergency proclamation for the state's prison system declaring that the health and safety of 29 of 33 prisons is endangered by severe overcrowding.

The result of this proclamation is that the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation will now be able to use a streamlined process to transfer inmates to correctional facilities out of state. Nineteen thousand inmates have already volunteered to be transferred. This emergency proclamation will provide much-needed short-term relief to the prison overcrowding crisis in California. In the medium term, the governor will reintroduce his prison reform package to increase the capacity of California prisons to hold the most serious offenders while providing alternatives for lower risk and female offenders.

While California's chief probation officers support the governor's proposals, we believe community-based corrections plays a critical role in the efforts to reduce prison overcrowding and should be included in any long-term solutions to improving community safety.

Probation agencies throughout California supervise the majority of the state's convicted criminals. There is a well-defined link between probationers and prison populations. In fact, probation officers initiate revocation proceedings that result in more than 17,000 offenders being sent to state prison each year. A conservative estimate of the cost of sending probationers to prison, assuming that each offender stays in prison for the current average of two years, is \$1.1 billion for the two-year period.

Research shows implementing evidence-based practices (practices backed by valid research that have a demonstrated ability to reduce repeat offenses) can reduce recidivism and decrease the prison-bound probation population by between 10 percent and 30 percent. This reduction could save the state up to \$330 million annually in prison costs.

One of the biggest barriers to rehabilitating offenders in the community is the high ratio of offenders to probation officers in California. Because of heavy caseloads, the majority of probationers receive little proactive supervision. These caseloads average 474 probationers per officer, potentially leading to an over-reliance on revocation in order to protect community safety.

Another leading cause of probationers being sent to prison is what is commonly known as a "technical violation." These are typically caused by a probationer not complying with all of the court-ordered conditions of probation – not by the commission of a new crime. The rate of technical violations is highly correlated with the number of probationers on an officer's caseload.

In San Diego, technical violations have been significantly reduced by ensuring that orientation meetings are

offered in all San Diego neighborhoods and are accessible to all probationers. This new initiative reduces technical violations and may have a positive effect on prison overcrowding over time.

The Legislature should allocate \$56 million to support the provision of state-of-the-art supervision and rehabilitative services to offenders at the county level. This can be accomplished by adding 500 supervision officers to probation departments throughout the state, and by retooling the mission of community-based officers to advance the goal of reducing prison overcrowding.

The additional 500 officers would allow California probation departments to reduce caseload size and facilitate individualized treatment plans. The treatment plans focus on increasing education and employment, reducing substance abuse and creating opportunities for pro-social activity. Offenders following specialized treatment plans are more likely to become successful members of the community and not end up in state prison.

The use of evidence-based practices is part of the national reform of community corrections that the governor is seeking to emulate in California. These practices should be supported among probation as well as correctional and parole populations. By utilizing evidence-based practices to reduce recidivism, we can stem the tide of offenders who reach prison gates, increase community safety and save taxpayer dollars at the same time.

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