

THE SACRAMENTO BEE OPINION

EDITORIALS | Views of the editorial board

Unlock prisons' hold on budget

GUARDS UNION IS AN OBSTACLE, BUT IT'S POSSIBLE TO ENVISION A WAY FORWARD

1 Of all the factors driving California's budget crisis, none is harder to deal with than the out-of-control costs of the state's prisons. To understand why, a bit of history is in order.

The prison problems are complicated, but one organization lies at the heart of all the complexities. That is the California Correctional Peace Officers Association.

Given the CCPOA's current influence in California politics, it's hard to believe that it was once an organization of 2,500 members with little clout. That changed in the 1980s, when the union combined parole officers with prison guards.

With larger numbers and dues, CCPOA began to press for longer prison terms and more prisons (with more guards) - and for higher salaries and more say in prison management.

And realizing it needed a sympathetic face to win public support, CCPOA was instru-

3 The corrections budget has gone from 4.3 percent of the state's general fund in 1985-86 to 11.2 percent today. It has steadily displaced spending on higher education.

That brings us to the current crisis. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has made proposals that would reduce costs by cutting the prison population by 15,000 and the parole population by 65,000 by June 2010. The CCPOA has resisted these ideas.

The CCPOA also has been unwilling to do major rethinking of the 2001-2006 contract. The state and the CCPOA reached impasse on a new contract last September. The union has refused formal negotiations since then.

In addition, the CCPOA is suing to stop the governor's latest proposal for two unpaid furlough days a month.

Given the union's raw power and its apparent intransigence, compromise may seem impossible. The union's lead-

mental in creating a crime victims' movement. As the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice describes it, "The CCPOA brought money; crime victims brought a pretty face."

As the union's membership grew, so did its campaign coffers. To advance its agenda, CCPOA wielded campaign contributions and threats of electoral defeat. It flexed its muscle at every level, from the governor to the Legislature to district attorneys, and among politicians of both parties.

The union's single greatest victory, however, was its 2001-2006 contract, greased by more than \$3 million in campaign contributions. That contract increased prison guard salaries out of proportion to other state employees and decreased management's day-to-day control of prisons.

Here are the measures of CCPOA's success:

■ The state has built 22 new prisons since 1984 (compared with 12 prisons between 1852 and 1984).

■ Voters passed the "three strikes" initiative; governors and legislators have added hundreds of sentence "enhancements" throughout the penal code. As a result, California now imprisons a much greater proportion of the state's population - 453 per 100,000 residents in 2007, compared with 102 per 100,000 in 1980.

■ Today, most prison guards earn more than \$70,000 in base pay, not including overtime or benefits.

■ CCPOA members take advantage of sick leave and overtime rules - sick leave, incredibly, counts as time worked in calculating overtime - to get an average of \$16,000 a year in overtime pay. Last year, this cost the state \$471 million in overtime costs (up from \$53 million a decade ago), a big contributor to the state's deficit.

And its members, though, surely must recognize this reality, even if they cannot admit it in public: The situation is unsustainable. One way or another, the state must get its prison costs under control - not just in this crisis but in the long term as well.

And in the long run, the union surely stands to lose if it insists on making this a winner-take-all game. Avoiding that will require finding solutions that are both creative and flexible. Here's one possibility, a win-win solution for the union that would save the state a lot of money:

Compress the prison work week into fewer, longer shifts - switching from the traditional eight-hour workday to a 12-hour day. Prison systems in other states already have gone this route. These states have seen reduced absenteeism and drastic reductions in use of sick leave and overtime, bringing substantial savings. And prison workers like it better, improving morale.

In practical terms, this would mean going to a two-week, 84-hour schedule. One week would be 36 hours (three days on, four days off); the other would be 48 hours (four days on, three days off). Guards would receive overtime pay only if they worked more than 84 hours in a pay period. Sick days no longer would count as days worked.

This change could be made now, and would be a multimillion-dollar down payment for beginning real talks on how to reduce prison populations and prison system costs. Similar solutions can be found in other parts of the prisons' operations, if CCPOA members recognize that the days of lavish contracts and unfettered political power are past. The current crisis is the time to chart a way forward to get California's prison costs under control.

COMING SATURDAY

The plight of the poor and disabled.

California Correctional Peace Officers Association

Founded: 1957

Membership: 30,000

President: Mike Jimenez

Web site: www.ccpca.org

Campaign contributions for

2005-2008: \$20,531,340.96



A path to the common good in California's budget crisis.

sacbee.com

SHARE YOUR VIEWS

What sacrifices would you be willing to make to help California close its \$40 billion budget gap? Join the discussion in our new Opinion forum. sacbee.com/forums