

# counterpunch

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*Toward a Progressive and Humane Prison System*

## The Ongoing Struggle for Prison Reform

by KENNETH E. HARTMAN

Here they go again. In an act of breathtaking bureaucratic indifference, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation is moving to effectively dismantle the Progressive Programming Facility at California State Prison – Los Angeles County. This time they're couching it as a part of their giant "blueprint" ([www.cdcr.ca.gov](http://www.cdcr.ca.gov)): nothing personal, not against the program, just a way to slip out from under federal court control.

And here we go again, too. The community of men on this yard, the only fully functional, standards-based facility in the state's tottering empire of concrete and steel, have peacefully organized to overturn this terrible, shortsighted decision. Along with our friends and families, and with the help of many influential people both inside and outside the prison system, we've produced a simple, cost-effective, easy-to-implement proposal that's been hand delivered to Secretary of Corrections Matthew Cate and mailed to the leading figures in the state government.

There is an online petition that can be accessed, along with the other documents relevant to this matter at: [www.prisonhonorprogram.org](http://www.prisonhonorprogram.org).

In years past, we've fought campaigns to save the program because administrators at the prison level wanted to end it, and other times because administrators at headquarters level wanted to end it. In all these previous cases the issue was the program's highly successful repudiation of the punitive, get tough, negative reinforcement model of corrections. The prison bosses couldn't countenance the idea of running a prison yard on mushy ideas like restoration, rehabilitation, and rewarding positive behavior.

We had the great good fortune of attracting the attention of former California State Senator Gloria Romero who immediately understood exactly what we were trying to



accomplish. I'm sure it helped that she had been a psychology professor prior to entering electoral politics. Before this state's draconian term limits knocked her out of office she shepherded a bill through both houses of the legislature that would have mandated honor programs throughout the prison system. The only opposition came from the bosses at the top – even the notoriously hard-line guards' union supported the bill. But Arnold Schwarzenegger, in one of his many acts of ignorance in regards to the prisons, vetoed it.

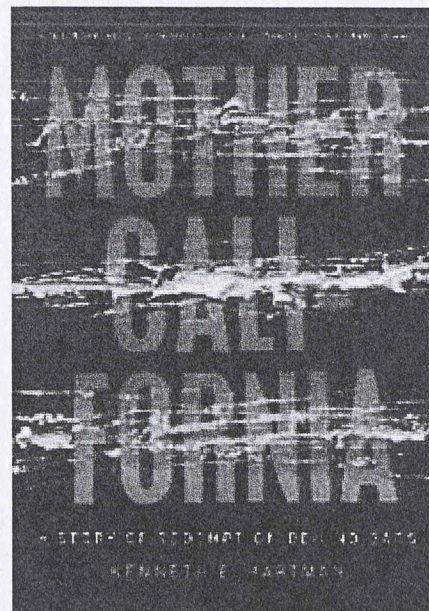
Maybe it was an event of Karmic significance, maybe it was simply on account of his epic failure as a manager, but the same big boss that publicly stated his revulsion at associating the word honor with prisoners – thus the vaguely Orwellian Progressive Programming Facility – abruptly “retired” from his position.

His replacement, current holder of the least enviable position in California's government, is a marked improvement. He's a well-educated outsider to the lifer prison bureaucrats who seems to genuinely want to bring real change to the prisons. I've met him on several occasions, and I like him. (And that's not something I often or easily say about any prison chieftain.)

The trouble is he's riding a mostly uncontrollable beast that could throw him at any point. As another high official I also rather like once told me, the rehabilitation side of the house means well, but the other side, the enforcers, still run the show. And, in the minds of the enforcers, this program by whatever name constitutes a pain the ass, at best.

So, every chance they get they take. Every chance to upend rehabilitative programs is seized upon and this situation is no different. The prison system is under federal court order to lower the population from a staggering 200% of capacity to a mere 137.5%. To accomplish this grand task the administrators developed their grand plan. I've read it. It's very detailed, right down to the ultimate composition and function of each building in every prison.

But it's painfully obvious the planners haven't studied Prussian military theorist Count Helmuth von Moltke who wrote in 1880, “No plan of operations reaches with any certainty beyond the first encounter with the enemy's main force.”





In this case, the enemy is reality on the ground. Prisons are tricky places to operate. Things can go bad and get out of hand without much apparent warning. But the people walking down the tiers, sitting in the chow halls, and taking laps around the track on the yard, they know when a prison is falling apart, and why. Those same people, the prisoners, also know what works, what will transform anarchy and violence into peaceful productivity.

Planners, by their very nature, don't tend to come down to the yard, or eat in the chow halls, or walk down a tier very often, and they never talk to prisoners.

Someone, regardless, had to sign off on the final plan before it was published. Someone had to decide that there would be no beds for standards-based programming, of either the progressive or the honorable kind, in Los Angeles County, from which spring close to half the state's prisoners. Someone had to sign off on the decision to effectively kill off this program.

And that's why we'll keep on fighting for the kind of fundamental reform that can, and should, transform this prison system.

And that's why I'll keep writing and asking the world on the other side of the fences to become involved in this struggle which is actually about *their* prison system.

Please go to [www.prisonhonorprogram.org](http://www.prisonhonorprogram.org) and sign the online petition. If you've got the time and the inclination, read about the history of the Honor Program/Progressive Programming Facility and get involved in the long term struggle to change the prisons, *your prisons*, into places where men and women go to pay their debt to society and have the opportunity to become better people in the process.

***Kenneth E. Hartman*** has served more than 32 continuous years in the California prison system. He is the award-winning author of *Mother California: A Story of Redemption Behind Bars* (Atlas & Co. 2009), and has been published widely in newspapers and magazines around the country. Ken is the founder and chairman of The Steering Committee for the Honor Program. (For more, see: [www.prisonhonorprogram.org](http://www.prisonhonorprogram.org).) He is also a charter member of the National Advisory Board of Californians United for a Responsible Budget, an organization dedicated to shrinking the prison-industrial complex. (For more, see: [www.curbprisonspending.org](http://www.curbprisonspending.org).) He can be contacted indirectly at: [kennethehartman@hotmail.com](mailto:kennethehartman@hotmail.com). For more information, see: [www.kennethehartman.com](http://www.kennethehartman.com).