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Inmates could help resolve prison debacle

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With all of California's crises crowding the headlines, it's easy to forget the multi-billion dollar fiasco that is the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). The stark truths of this state's failed prison policies include: the worst return-to-prison rate in the country; federal courts demanding constitutionally adequate (read, very expensive) health care; dangerous overcrowding and understaffing; and a consistent unwillingness to admit mistakes.

At a recent hearing of the California Rehabilitation Oversight Board, highly respected criminologist Dr. Barry Krisberg of the National Council on Crime and Delinquency described the CDCR's latest reform plans as "happy talk."

Here's some real talk.

I've served more than 28 continuous years in this prison system. It is, fundamentally, broken. Absent a genuine paradigm shift in planning, operating and executing, there will be no change from the top. In fact, until the get-tough-on-prisoners mode is replaced by get-smart-thinking, the system will only get worse, cost more money and turn out more parolees wholly unprepared to re-enter society and succeed.

To his credit, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger appointed Matthew Cate the new secretary of the CDCR. To his credit, Secretary Cate has expressed a willingness to listen and reconsider. Now comes the tough part of his job: Cramming the idea of rehabilitation into an entity designed to thwart

rehabilitation. Re-educating a massive bureaucracy to reject the big stick will be a monumentally hard task.

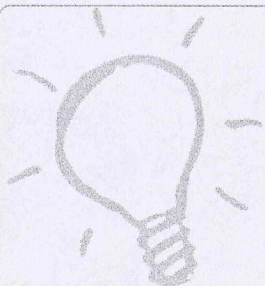
Luckily, there are a few bright spots in this dismal picture. The Honor Program at the California State Prison-Los Angeles County, a prisoner-initiated program that has garnered widespread positive attention from the media and the Legislature and developed a loyal group of free-world supporters, is one of these oases of possibility.

In a nutshell, maximum-security prisoners are expected to abstain from drugs and alcohol, reject violence and negative (meaning normal prison") behavior and participate in treatment, community service and other meaningful programs. Most important to the success of this model is the prisoner participants have to volunteer. This last aspect has never sat well with the old bulls who seem to believe that rehabilitation is simply a codeword for yet another big stick.

But rehabilitation will remain an elusive goal until prisoners are sold on the idea. This means that positive behavior needs to be rewarded. (At present, only negative behavior gets any attention.)

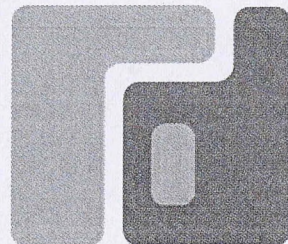
Bringing prisoners on-board and into the process is a revolutionary concept to the current crop of administrators who continue to mismanage this system. It is not to the rest of the world of corrections. California is bringing up the rear on this idea, trailing far behind other states. The truly astonishing aspect of this failure is how resistant the CDCR has proved to be, no matter the court orders, no matter the findings of a dozen blue-ribbon panels, no matter the dismal recidivism rate. It is as if reality stops both outside the fences of the prisons and outside the doors to headquarters in Sacramento.

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Of course, reality has a way of asserting itself, and some kind of change is coming to California's prisons.

If the same old recalcitrance prevails, it will be on account of tragedy followed by courts ordering sweeping, expensive and humiliating change.

If fresh ideas are supported, change could be in the form of real success.

The Honor Program is the kind of positive approach to corrections that warrants support. The deliberate infliction of pain-and-suffering policies of the past 25 years have failed and will continue to fail. Instead, put prisoners to work on reforming themselves, restoring their communities and rewarding those of us who accept the challenge. It is not complicated, and it does not cost a penny more to operate.

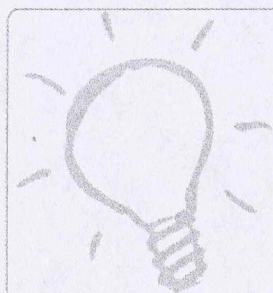
And it works. I've seen it with my own eyes.

If the leadership of the CDCR would only open their eyes, they would see it works, too.

They work for you. Tell them to open their eyes.

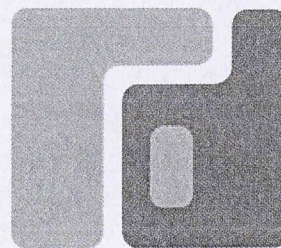
- The author is serving a life sentence at the California State Prison-Los Angeles County, in Lancaster, where he helped found the Honor Program. Visit www.prisonhonorprogram.org.

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