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HEADLINE: State prison reform proving elusive;
Correctional officers union, governor, bureaucracy cited for lack of progress.

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Earl Stocker stole so many cars from parking lots at Disneyland and the Crystal Cathedral that he could stash them on side streets and wait for the phone to ring. When a chop shop called for German parts, Stocker would roll out of bed and into a spare Mercedes. The proceeds supported a \$10,000 weekly crack cocaine habit.

Then, in 1991, Compton police caught Stocker wiggling out his bathroom window. By chance, he was sent to a private prison in Bakersfield where the guards dressed in street clothes and church volunteers baptized inmates in the exercise yard.

Stocker said he found Jesus, became a tutor and, after serving his sentence, returned weekly to teach a class and preach to inmates -- until last year, when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, citing pending reforms that would dramatically lower the state's prison population, closed the Mesa Verde Community Correctional Facility.

"It was as if there was a death in the family," Stocker said.

The death may have been premature. A year after Mesa Verde's closure, the state prison population has soared to a record high. California now incarcerates enough people to populate the cities of Irvine and Laguna Beach. Inmates are triple-bunked in gyms and TV rooms.

Though Schwarzenegger said his reforms would end chronic cost overruns by rehabilitating inmates in the community instead of locking them up, the corrections system is more than \$200 million over budget this year. Most of the promised reforms have not materialized.

"We were hoping with the arrival of Schwarzenegger that there would be reforms throughout corrections," said Richard Warne, city manager of Coalinga, which runs a private prison focused on giving inmates job skills. "But we see no change. It's business as usual."

It was just four months ago that Schwarzenegger, after inviting photographers and cameramen to film him peering from a guard tower at Mule Creek State Prison, pledged "to make sure that California reforms its entire correctional system."

"I'm probably the only one in the Capitol that does not owe the (correctional officers union) anything, because I never took any money from them," Schwarzenegger told reporters, adding that he would replace California's lock-'em-up mentality with a commitment to "rehabilitate our prisoners, to give them education, vocational training; to teach them skills so when they get out they are successful."

Last week, corrections Secretary Rod Hickman, a former prison guard, acknowledged that the administration has yet to meet that goal.

"We didn't make it as fast as we wanted to," he said. "We're probably at 40 percent of where we wanted to be in implementation." He said Schwarzenegger is "disappointed" in the state's high population and budget numbers.

But Hickman vowed that next year, "we are going to change. And it's going to be a radical change."

He said he plans to shake up the entire organization of the corrections system by eliminating all existing departments and replacing them with a single, top-down agency. One half of the agency will be responsible for incarceration and parole, the other for rehabilitation.

“I’m going to blow up some boxes,” he said, echoing Schwarzenegger’s much-publicized vow to shake up California’s bureaucracy.

Experts said they have heard such talk before. What’s lacking, they said, is evidence that Schwarzenegger has the guts to tackle the real barriers to corrections reform: a powerful correctional officers union wedded to the status quo, and a bureaucracy resistant to competition from outside treatment programs.

“All they’re doing now is just locking people up,” said Joe Gunn, a former Los Angeles police commissioner who co-wrote an administration-ordered review of the corrections system this year. “Very few of the inmates are given an opportunity to rehabilitate themselves.”

Lobbyists who work on prison issues say administration staff told them Schwarzenegger’s political advisers have warned him away from antagonizing the union, which has a reputation for spending millions in elections to portray opponents as soft on crime.

Gary White, who ran Mesa Verde, said his and two other private prisons were closed a year ago “because we were nonunion and they felt that we were threatening their empire.”

Said Gunn: “I don’t see anyone in the governor’s office stepping forward and saying to the union, ‘You’re wrong.’”

In a March 18 memo to members of the correctional officers union, union Vice President Chuck Alexander described Schwarzenegger’s plan to send parole violators to community treatment programs instead of back to prison. Warning that the policy would be a “detriment to public safety,” Alexander instructed parole-agent members: “Do not capitulate.”

Since then, the program has been plagued by delays. In Orange County, the state hasn’t commissioned a single drug-treatment or halfway-house bed. So parole violators with addictions must be shipped to a Los Angeles County treatment center in Santa Clarita -- a process that can take half a day for a parole agent with roughly 50 other cases to monitor.

Recently, state officials, frustrated with the pace of reform, told parole supervisors in a conference call to meet a quota of sending three parole violators to a treatment program per week. Agents complain they are now being forced to refer violators to drug-treatment programs even when they don’t need them.

Jeff Fagot, supervisor for the parole region that includes Orange County, said the problem is not simply resistance from agents. The state, he said, doesn’t pay enough to entice treatment programs to take parolees. Halfway houses can get a better deal treating federal inmates, he said.

Lance Corcoran, spokesman for the union, said agents support reform -- as long as it’s real. What Schwarzenegger is attempting “is an exercise in population manipulation ... to give some sort of impression to certain legislators that we’re doing better,” he said.

Contrary to the “myth” of union power, Corcoran said, correctional officers have been shut out of decision making since Schwarzenegger arrived and feel a “great fear of retaliation” if they point out flaws in the governor’s plans. So they’re forming what he called a “think tank” to come up with their own reforms.

“We want to see programs that are successful expanded,” he said. “Educational opportunities or opportunities on the streets, rather than training someone in small-engine repair and paroling them to downtown Oakland, which doesn’t have many lawnmower shops.”

Directors of prisons and community programs that provide education and treatment say they are still waiting for

such talk to become reality.

Ron Murray, who directs a private prison for 208 women north of Sacramento, said he has been telling Corrections Department officials for months that he could take an additional 260 inmates. His 15-year-old prison, where women till an organic garden and take parenting classes, recently earned a perfect score on a Corrections Department audit. The prison, which staffs many of its programs with 200 volunteers from the surrounding small town of Live Oak, costs half as much per inmate as a state-run lockup.

"We could help them if they let us," said Murray, noting that the state's two main women's prisons are at more than 180 percent capacity. "But they keep stalling us."

In south Los Angeles, owners of a re-entry center for 200 minimum-security inmates said they are still trying to get the department to send them prisoners -- even though their program would cost the state a third less than prison and enroll inmates in a local church program that refurbishes dilapidated houses for low-income families.

Mark Thompson, director of 89th Street House, said Hickman and Corrections Department Director Jeanne Woodford recently visited and gave the center thumbs up. Schwarzenegger's deputy Cabinet secretary in charge of corrections also expressed interest.

"Everyone seems positive, but nothing happens," Thompson said. "The union opposes privatization."

Corcoran said that "obviously our advocacy may have had some influence (on department privatization decisions). But I don't think it's been overwhelming."

Hickman acknowledged that his agency has been "resistant and ... had a very, very strained relationship" with private corrections providers. "I think a lot of it's cultural. I think a lot of it is previous direction."

He said a staff member who works on contracting with private prisons and treatment centers recently told him: "Do you realize last year we were told we could not talk to these folks?"

Hickman said he has scheduled a conference in January to gather every private and faith-based group that wants to work with the corrections agency, "from people affiliated with the Dalai Lama to the Nation of Islam."

He pointed to a new strategic plan he is implementing that lists as its sixth goal: "Seek out partnerships" and establish a network of community-based programs by June 2006. The state, he said, is readying plans to reopen two private prisons, including Mesa Verde.

Hickman said it has taken the prison system 20 years to reach its current state -- 20 years of a massive building program, swelling inmate numbers and growing union influence.

Former Gov. Gray Davis, for example, resolutely backed correctional officers' interests while taking millions in union campaign contributions.

Former corrections Director Edward Alameida stated in court filings earlier this year that in 2003, Davis, flanked by the union's president and vice president, told Alameida to consider crafting his department's budget to fit union priorities.

Hickman said such days are over. No longer does the union "get to come and tell me how to run corrections," he said.

Earl Stocker said he hopes the state keeps such promises. After finishing his sentence at Mesa Verde in 1994, he got a job cleaning toilets at a laundry company around the corner from the prison. He worked his way up to salesman. He told his boss in the interview: "I've been selling all my life -- just the wrong stuff."

Asked what turned him around, Stocker said: "I knew if I did not change, the next time someone saw me it would be in the graveyard. ... So I just made up my mind."

He said anyone trying to reform should consider the story of the day he got caught. He was sitting in his bedroom pulling on his socks, a sense of foreboding in the air. In the next room, his 8-year-old daughter put on a song by rapper Ice Cube. The lyrics, he said, still haunt him: ``You better check yourself before you wreck yourself."

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GRAPHIC: Lofty plans: Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger, right, and correctional chief Roderick Hickman look out from a gun tower at Mule Creek State Prison in Ione, dramatizing plans for change. Reunion: Earl Stocker, left, laughs with Jim Tozzi, former captain of Mesa Verde Community Correctional Facility, in the yard at the Bakersfield prison. A push for parole: Attorney Rich Pfeiffer talks with inmate Lu Cartier at the California Institution for Women. A former prisoner himself, Pfeiffer now fights for parole options for women who are still jailed.

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