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## HARD TIME

# Why I Quit the Prison System

**California's last corrections chief on what the state needs to do next.**

By Jeanne S. Woodford

Jeanne S. Woodford spent 28 years working in the California prisons and was the acting head of the state corrections department when she resigned in April.

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I SPENT NEARLY three decades working in California's prison system, beginning in 1978 when I arrived as a 24-year-old corrections officer at San Quentin.

During that time, I watched the inmate population grow from about 26,000 to more than 170,000 in 2006. Prison capacity tripled during this same time period, yet our prisons are more overcrowded than ever. The budget of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation will exceed \$8 billion in 2007, and yet we will still lack the funds to meet even the health and mental health needs of the offenders we house, much less to fund the programs that offenders need to prepare them to be successful in society.

I was personally thrilled two years ago when Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger proposed adding the word "rehabilitation" to the name of the California Department of Corrections. For me, this change reflected an important transition from the old punishment model that we'd lived with for so many years.

The new "California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation" was supposed to research and implement new practices and programs that would help prisoners succeed when they were released and thereby help bring down California's extraordinarily high recidivism rates.

July 1, 2005, when the new agency was baptized, was indeed a bright day, filled with hope for the beginning of an improved criminal justice policy for California.

But despite high hopes at the inception, the reality is that not much has changed. Because of short-term political concerns on the part of state legislators, pandering campaign tactics that make politicians scared to be seen as soft on crime, and the extraordinary power of the correctional officers union, it's been impossible to truly turn around the system. Chronic underfunding and prison overpopulation continue, and the recidivism rate remains the highest in the country.

Earlier this year, I left my job as acting head of the corrections department in part because of frustration over the inability to push through the kinds of changes I thought were necessary.

How has this situation come about? For the last three decades, California criminal justice policy has developed haphazardly, through laws passed by politicians whose chief goal was to appear to be tougher on crime than their opponents. Any attempt to have a serious discussion about California criminal justice policy (or the lack thereof) has been stymied by campaign accusations designed to scare voters and weaken reform-minded candidates.

The result has been an overburdened, expensive system lacking clear sentencing guidelines or parole policies. For instance, because we insist on putting every offender

on parole upon release from prison — including nonviolent, one-time offenders — we exhaust our resources trying to supervise everyone instead of focusing on cases that pose the greatest threat to public safety.

Such initiatives have the unintended consequence of placing the public in harm's way. When a parolee commits a new crime, for example, authorities will often fail to prosecute, instead allowing the parole revocation to serve as the only penalty; this means that some offenders are serving 12 months or less for serious crimes.

As California's corrections costs continue to escalate, other states (also facing increasing pressures) have begun to rethink their entire criminal justice systems — from arrest to incarceration to reentry — and to review the role of each of the three branches of government in the sentencing of criminals and post-sentencing supervision.

There are many successful models that can provide tried and tested programs and practices that can be replicated here. Michigan, Washington, Oregon and Ohio are examples of states that have applied the science of corrections and offender behavior to bring about true criminal justice reform.

Changes in policies and programs in these states have resulted in violent criminals serving longer sentences. But they also have led to programs that help ensure that those prisoners who are released will survive better on the outside. Oregon's Prison Reform and Inmate Work Act, for instance, requires that inmates engage in "meaningful work" 40 hours a week and has effectively strengthened education and other treatment programming in the state's correctional system. In Washington, the "Neighborhood-Based Supervision" program allows parole officers to work directly within the community, cooperating with police officers and community members while supervising offenders who live nearby.

Other states are beginning to target their resources to ensure that they are used in addressing the risks and needs of those who pose the greatest threat of re-offending. Often, treating nonserious, nonviolent offenders is not a good use of state dollars.

Many voters believe that as a result of our state's tough-on-crime policies, such as the three-strikes law and mandatory sentencing, average sentences are longer today than they used to be. Although it's true that people convicted under three-strikes serve longer terms than they would have previously, the average sentence for all inmates has actually declined. That's because the lack of jail space, coupled with overburdened district attorneys' offices and court systems, has resulted in more plea bargains, which promise shorter sentences.

The unintended consequence is that some offenders are getting out of prison who should not be, and, yes, other nonviolent offenders are being incarcerated for too long when other safe options are available.

One obstacle to serious reform in the California prisons is the California Correctional Peace Officers Assn., the correctional officers union, which wields tremendous political power. Even legislators who understand the issues involved in transforming the prison system have been unable to do what they need to do because of the union's willingness to use dollars and scare tactics against reform-minded politicians.

A meaningful discussion about California's criminal justice policy must include a reexamination of sentencing and the role of the courts. It must include a conversation about how to apply the right sentence to the right offender. It must address post-release supervision and the role of local communities in helping keep ex-offenders from backsliding. We must discuss increased latitude for judges and the curtailing of plea bargains. And any discussion must be bipartisan, with a focus on the science of criminal behavior — not on tough-on-crime bromides that are designed to scare the public.

It is well past time to rethink our criminal justice policy in California.

