

**SFGate.com****Prison realities**

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**FOR THE FIRST** time in a generation, the prospects for significant prison reform seem tantalizingly at hand.

Last week, after a meeting with the leadership of the state Legislature, Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger said, "Everything is on the table."

That included an acknowledgment that the solution will almost inevitably involve releasing inmates who no longer pose a danger to society -- and continue to occupy prison space at huge expense to the taxpayers.

Admittedly, Schwarzenegger's hand was forced by the prospect of a court order that would impose a cap on the prison population, and a court ruling rejecting his plan to transfer inmates to private prisons in other states. Another hurdle has been the Legislature's refusal to endorse his multibillion-dollar scheme to build new prisons and jail facilities throughout the state.

Whatever the motivation, it has been years since a California governor said he would contemplate "releasing some people that are maybe sick and cannot be a threat to society." Schwarzenegger also said he's actively discussing whether some inmates who have committed nonviolent crimes could be released. Nonviolent offenders must be at the center of any plan to reform the system.

Nearly two years ago, we visited the first licensed elderly-care unit in a California prison at the California Medical Facility in Vacaville. At the time, half of the inmates there suffered from dementia. Others were paralyzed from strokes, or suffered from Parkinson's and other debilitating diseases. The way things are going, it won't be too long before just about every prison in California will have to offer similar services to geriatric inmates.

It's an inescapable truth that our prisons don't have the space or the resources to admit every inmate that judges, juries and parole officers send in their direction. The surest way to free up prison space for the most dangerous offenders is to start releasing the least dangerous and the most infirm from a prison population that has outgrown California's ability to sustain it.

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