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## Barnidge: California's prison problems just keep getting worse

By Tom Barnidge  
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A FELLOW can go hoarse reciting all the ills that plague California.

Public schools are underfunded, social services have been cut, tax revenues have gone down at the same time pension liabilities have gone up.

Yet, for all the troubles laid at our feet, most are apt to be temporary. The economy eventually will regain its feet.

Something else is far more worrisome. That's what to do about California's prisons, which are costly, overcrowded and staggeringly ineffective at rehabilitation.

It's bad enough that California allocated more than \$8 billion (nearly 7 percent of the state budget) to run 33 prisons last year. Worse is that more than 170,000 inmates are squeezed into facilities designed for half that many.

But here's the number that is hardest to swallow: Nearly 70 percent of parolees are arrested again. Recidivism is a major reason that California's prison population is the largest in the nation.

"Fat, drunk and stupid is no way to go through life,"

Dean Wormer once told the frat boys of Animal House. Overpriced, overcrowded and ineffective is no motto for a department of corrections.

So out of control is the operation that a federal court has ordered California to reduce its inmate count by 40,000 within two years. How that is done and which inmates are released should be of concern to every resident in the state.

Vernon Williams is an expert on the topic. He

spent nearly six of his 34 years in state prisons, doing time in both Folsom and San Quentin before reclaiming his life.

As a frustrated 19-year-old who saw a promising baseball career vanish because of an ineligibility ruling, he hooked up with the wrong crowd and took part in a home invasion that brought convictions for assault with a deadly weapon and false imprisonment. His first two attempts to re-enter society ended with parole violations involving drugs. No one knows more about how a good life can go bad.

"I've been a 3.0 student, I've been in a 4-by-7 cell and everything in between," he said.

These days, he lives in Martinez and runs the Williams Group, a company that works with government agencies in helping the misdirected become productive.

Rehabilitation, he said, is not an impossible goal. When vocational training, literacy classes and anger management sessions are available, a convict has a better chance of transitioning into society. But California's prisons largely have abandoned the effort.

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With inmate numbers swelled beyond reason, the focus has been on housing. (There aren't enough cells for all the bunks at San Quentin.) Then there is the matter of funding. Part of last year's state budget cuts included \$250 million slashed from rehabilitation programs.

When offenders are returned to society without marketable skills, Williams explained, they return to what they know — the same activities that put them behind bars. Life after prison is a harsh adjustment even for those who want to go straight. Most ex-cons succeed only with a strong support system — friends and family to offer help and a place to stay.

Parolees normally are required to return to the community where they were convicted. That can be a problem, as Williams learned. He was paroled to San Jose, where he had dealt drugs and his only contacts were other criminals. He asked for a transfer to Pittsburg, where his mother lives, but was denied.

Forced to live in a facility for recovering substance abusers and rooming with a former heroin addict, he had little to occupy his time other than his \$11-an-hour construction job. When the work site moved and he was unable to get there by bus, he lost that. He returned to dealing drugs and an income of as much as \$5,000 a day.

"I finally said the hell with it," he said. "These are the kinds of obstacles parolees face."

California's early-release program for "low-risk" offenders, necessitated by federal order, promises to create similar problems. So will nonrevocable parole — a program that cuts costs by freeing current parolees from state supervision.

"Nonrevocable parole is a setup," Williams said. "They'll be on parole, but they won't have a parole officer. It won't be brought to our attention until they commit a new crime."

Williams, who redefined his life through schooling and hard work, wants to help others do the same. His company is part of the East County Re-entry Collaborative, an organization of community-based groups assembled to assist returning ex-convicts.

He will provide training to parolees, connect them with service providers and respond to their questions with answers learned the hard way.

We can only wish him well. Recycling offenders through prison sure isn't the answer.

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