

## **SUMMARY**

### **CALIFORNIA STATE SENATE SELECT COMMITTEE ON MENTAL HEALTH HEARING “REDUCING CALIFORNIA’S PRISON POPULATION & RECIDIVISM RATE” May 31, 2013**

California spends about \$10 billion a year on its prison system. But for all that money it has failed to make our communities safer while producing an abysmal 70 percent recidivism rate.

On May 31, 2013, the California Senate Select Committee on Mental Health convened a hearing to investigate how improving access to mental health and substance abuse services for parolees, probationers and at-risk groups can result in lower incarceration and recidivism rates.

Experts including Sheriff Lee Baca, Dr. Luis Garcia, Richard Rawson, Sharon Aungst and Ross Peterson provided the Select Committee with strategies and recommendations. Actor Danny Trejo also shared his personal story as a former addict and ex-convict, providing his insight as a drug and alcohol intervention counselor and Director of Western Pacific Rehab in Glendale.

Although each presenter offered a unique perspective, several reoccurring themes emerged:

1. Despite their measured success, evidence-based practices and programs are limited and not always offered to parolees and probationers.
2. All experts agreed: Programs that provide parolees and probationers with a comprehensive continuum of services, including integrated behavioral health care, case management, housing and employment services, achieve better outcomes. For example, outcome data from Telecare Corporation’s Corrections Outreach and Recovery Enhancement (CORE) program reflects:
  - 65% drop in clients return to custody,
  - 40% reduction in homeless episodes,
  - 64% reduction in psychiatric hospitalization, and
  - 82% drop in the number of days clients are homeless since enrollment.
3. More focus on rehabilitation and early re-entry preparation is needed.
  - Enrollment into Medi-Cal and community services should occur well in advance of an inmate’s release.
  - Parolees and probationers are more successful when access to treatment is readily available.

- Access to behavioral health treatment, and other community and education services should be made available to inmates while in jail/prison.
  - Mentally ill patients need to be connected with community services so they do not experience a disruption in services upon their release from prison or parole.
  - The Education Based Incarceration program, an initiative spearheaded by Los Angeles County Sheriff Lee Baca, yields a remarkable 20% recidivism rate - 50% lower than California's average.
4. ACA provides enormous opportunities for the State to save millions of dollars, reduce recidivism and keep people healthy.
- Many parolees and probationers will be eligible for the newly expanded Medi-Cal program.
  - Allows state to shift large portion of medical costs.
  - The key is to maximize enrollment.
5. Changes to the existing Medi-Cal can save millions in state general fund and reduce recidivism.
- Suspending vs. terminating inmate's Medi-Cal benefits: Currently California terminates Medi-Cal benefits after individuals enter jail and prison, even though benefits can be suspended under federal rules.
  - Increasing access to highly effective opiate medications like methadone and buprenorphine: Make all opiate addiction medications already on the Medi-Cal formulary a Pharmacy Benefit.
  - Implement billing procedures to enable CDCR to be reimburse for Medi-Cal enrollment activities: CDCR should track and seek reimbursement for Medi-Cal enrollment efforts OR contract to bring in eligibility workers.
6. Stigma still exists in many cultures and by many law professionals, including judges and police officers.
- Services need to be culturally appropriated: Outreach needs to occur both in traditional and non-traditional settings like churches, local Latino markets, etc.

The hearing demonstrated the key to getting our crime and recidivism rates down is by making mental health and substance abuse services readily accessible to parolees, probationers and at-

risk individuals. The Select Committee plans to use the information and recommendations from the hearing to create better, more effective programs.

An estimated 33,000 inmates suffer from a mental illness. Nearly 30 percent of female parolees and 19 percent of male parolees have a diagnosed mental disorder. According to the non-partisan Legislative Analyst's Office, the state spends an average of \$52,000 annually to house a single inmate. The annual cost of housing an inmate with a severe mental illness can reach more than \$140,000.

Our prison system must not become a default for not providing adequate medical treatment for people suffering from a mental illnesses or substance use disorder. Locking people away is not a long-term solution. We must pay more than lip service to rehabilitation because building more prisons is not the answer.

### **Acknowledgements**

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Special thanks are given to the following elected officials for their participation in this State Hearing:

Senator Cathleen Galgiani, District 5

Senator Kevin de Leon, District 22

And to all panelists who contributed their valuable testimony.