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OPINION

# SAL RODRIGUEZ: No time to throw more money at prison guards

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By **SAL RODRIGUEZ** / Staff columnist  
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California can no longer afford the failed experiment of mass incarceration. When the voters approved measures like Proposition 36, which amended “three strikes” laws, and Prop. 47, which reduced penalties for petty theft and drug crimes, they were sending a clear message to Sacramento that trudging on with the same old policies was no longer acceptable.

Yet, with \$10.6 billion in proposed spending on the state’s corrections system, the most ever and equal to \$70,000 per prisoner per year, California government seems set to continue overspending on prisons that mostly fail to “correct” those who enter them, while underinvesting in alternatives.

The current legislative session has mostly mirrored others in recent years, in that lawmakers have shown little interest in curbing spending on corrections or figuring out how better to allocate the state’s finite resources on preventing crime and keeping former inmates from returning to prison.

If there’s anything California legislators need to get right this session, it’s ensuring the savings from a reduced prison population, thanks to Prop. 47, are properly allocated

to the Safe Neighborhood and Schools Fund, which Prop. 47 created to invest those savings in things like drug treatment, mental health programs and other crime prevention efforts.

Unfortunately, Gov. Jerry Brown, curiously, has estimated savings of less than \$30 million, well below the \$100 million projected by the independent Legislative Analyst's Office. "We find that the administration likely underestimates the savings and overestimates the costs resulting from" Prop. 47, the LAO reported in February. "For example, we estimate that the actual level of prison savings due to Prop. 47 could be \$83 million higher compared to the administration's estimate."

Getting the math correct is important because, without crime prevention programs adequately funded, it simply makes it harder for state and local governments to actually implement the wishes of the electorate. Keeping people out of state prisons for petty offenses is only part of the package with Prop. 47, while making sure they stay out, or never enter in the first place, is just as important.

Whether lawmakers adequately contemplate this remains to be seen, but they will be faced with another, costly feature of the criminal justice system: a new contract with the union for the state's prison guards, who, arguably, have benefited the most from overreliance on incarceration.

The proposed contract with the California Correctional Peace Officers Association, which represents Bargaining Unit 6, calls for a 9 percent pay raise through July 2018. According to analysis by the LAO, this would add roughly \$600 million in spending commitments by 2018-19.

Of course, there's no evidence that California prison guard pay at present isn't competitive – after all, state prison guards routinely earn \$100,000, with overtime – and it would be counterproductive for such a giveaway to be entertained at a time of overall fiscal constraints.

Whether there is any political will to reject the contract is another matter. After all, the CCPOA has long been one of the most influential unions in the state, contributing vast sums to politicians for decades and aggressively pushing a pro-incarceration agenda.

Throwing more money at prison guards isn't what is needed. Investing in alternatives to incarceration and evidence-based crime-prevention programming is a far greater need than taking care of a politically potent public-employee union.

Perhaps state lawmakers need to be reminded that the criminal justice system is supposed to advance the interests of justice, not fatten the pocketbooks of those who work within it. To date, Sacramento lawmakers have shown an inability to understand this, to the detriment of a coherent, well-functioning criminal justice system that emphasizes the salaries of public employees, instead of results.

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