



LITTLE HOOVER COMMISSION

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

November 13, 2003

For Additional Information Contact:

James P. Mayer
Executive Director
(916) 445-2125

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Executive Director

Commission Urges Parole Reforms

The Little Hoover Commission on Thursday urged reforms to California's parole system that would improve public safety and save hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

The Commission recommended that the State better prepare inmates for release and help them find jobs, housing and stay in drug treatment once released. The Commission also recommended the State make better use of interventions that can help struggling parolees get re-established in communities and more strategically use prisons for parolees posing the greatest risks to public safety.

"The State's fiscal crisis provides an important opportunity to rethink essential public safety policies that are not working well," Commission Chairman Michael E. Alpert said. "Topping the list should be the State's practice of releasing 125,000 felons from prison each year with little preparation for life on the outside, and then returning the vast majority to prison out of concern that they pose a risk to our communities."

California's prison system costs taxpayers nearly \$5 billion a year. Of that, some \$1.5 billion is spent on felons who have completed their prison terms and have been released on parole. Most of that - \$900 million - is spent on parolees who violate the conditions of their release and are sent back to prison, where they spend on average another five months, only to be released again.

The Commission found that California's parole policies are out of sync with those in other states. California puts a larger percentage of offenders on parole and returns offenders to prison for behaviors that in other states would result in a community-based punishment. The percentage of California parole violators returned to prison nearly tripled between 1980 and 2000. And while nationally 42 percent of parolees successfully complete parole, only 21 percent of California's parolees do not return to prison or do not flee supervision.

The reliance on prison for dealing with parole violators, criminal justice experts assert, costs more than interventions that do a better job of helping felons avoid future crimes. Moreover, the Commission found that while other states were modifying parole policies to improve the success of parolees, California has been slow to replicate successful parole models largely ignored the research and experience in other states, and even those small parole successes in California.

For example, the State could save an estimated \$151 million next year by using alternatives to prison for the large percentage of non-violent violations that involve drug use and possession. The State could achieve annual savings of \$300 million by reducing revocation sentences for some parolees from an average of 140 days to 100 days. Experts assert there would be no impact on public safety.

The recommendations in the report - *Back to the Community: Safe and Sound Parole Reforms* - were based on expert testimony, interviews and visits to prisons and community-based programs. California does have some model parole programs that will

be expanded in the coming year. However, the Commission concluded that they do not constitute the fundamental reforms necessary to safely release thousands of inmates every year.

“Many other states use a range of sanctions, including intensive supervision, electronic monitoring and halfway houses to cost-effectively respond to parole violators,” said Commissioner Stanley Zimmerman, who chaired the Commission’s subcommittee for the study. “Not every parole violator requires a return to prison to protect the community.”

Several local law enforcement leaders advised the Commission that California’s parole system is so “broken” that public safety is compromised and that local law enforcement could do a better job than the State of supervising parolees. In 2000, the Department of Corrections lost track of about one-fourth – or nearly 33,000 – of the parolees it was supervising. Nationally, about 9 percent of parolees abscond from supervision.

The Commission called California’s parole system a billion-dollar failure and identified four fundamental problems:

1. Prison time is not used to prepare inmates for their eventual release.
2. Available resources – especially those in communities – are not being used to assist parolees who would benefit.
3. The State returns the vast majority of parole violators to prison, even though other sanctions like drug treatment or short jail stays would cost less and help more.
4. Thousands of times each year, parole revocation is used in lieu of prosecution for parolees suspected of committing new, serious crimes.

“The Commission understands the politics of public safety. But the policies of public safety should be predicated on a shared and factual understanding of current practices and what could be done to reduce crime, violence and drug and alcohol abuse,” Chairman Alpert said.

The Commission’s recommendations, based on research and experience in other states, would systematically change how felons are prepared for their inevitable release and supervised when they return to their communities. Among the recommendations:

- Prison wardens should be responsible for developing pre-release programs and reporting to the Legislature how many inmates received assistance and how those inmates fared on parole. Good time credits should be used as rewards for inmates who prepare themselves for release and communities should be encouraged to sponsor programs for inmates who will soon be returning home.
- Local law enforcement and other agencies should be given more responsibility for supervising and assisting parolees and they should be financed from part of the \$1.5 billion now spent by the State on parolees.
- The State should rely more on local law enforcement and other agencies to intervene with inmates with drug addictions or other non-violent behavior that currently results in a costly return to state prison.
- The State should scrutinize how it now handles parolees suspected of committing serious new crimes, many of whom now appear to return to prison for a few months rather than having been prosecuted and sentenced to new prison terms by the courts.

Overall, the Commission concluded: “The State should either make fundamental changes to improve the correctional system and public safety, or explain to taxpayers and victims why it will not.”

The Little Hoover Commission is a bipartisan and independent state agency charged with recommending ways to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of state programs. The Commission’s recommendations are sent to the Governor and the Legislature. To obtain a copy of the report, *Back to the Community: Safe and Sound Parole Policies*, contact the Commission or visit its Web site: www.lhc.ca.gov/lhc.html.