

The Terminator's Curveball to California's Counties

Part 2: How the Inmate Transfer would affect County Jails

In the May Revise Budget Proposal, Governor Schwarzenegger dropped his latest bombshell in the never-ending battle over balancing the state budget. This is the second in a series that sheds light on the impacts to Alameda County residents.

The Governor's May Revise Budget proposal is comparable to a legislative Gulf oil spill. The Governor is the reckless multi-national energy company and the oil-soaked birds and wildlife are local governments. One of the Governor's current proposals is to dump State inmates in county jails and give local government a fraction of the money necessary to care for them. Just like the Gulf fishermen, Sheriffs will have no chance of mitigating the damage that will be caused by the flood of inmates coming from State to County facilities.

We are all familiar with the overcrowding in California's prisons. The Federal Government knows it, the Governor knows it, the State Legislature knows it and our residents know it. There has been no shortage of productive ideas for how to combat the overcrowding situation. One such idea, which is a fraction of the cost of incarceration, is to provide resources and local supervision for non-violent offenders close to their families and communities. Yet it seems that the Terminator has lost all common sense, ignoring good ideas and deciding to save the State government money in the short run while dropping short and long term problems on the doorstep of local communities.

The first gem in the Governor's revised budget is a proposal to transfer State inmates to County jails and pay the counties \$11,500 a year per inmate. That may sound like a lot of money per person, but let's take a look inside the numbers. The state pays roughly \$50,000 a year to house an inmate in State Prison. When counties contract with the state to house state inmates, we are given approximately \$77 a day, which is a bit more than \$28,000 a year. At that rate counties break even. So reimbursing counties for only \$11,500 per inmate per year will force each county to cough up millions of dollars to make up the difference.

The second pitch is a curveball for those of us who have advocated for releasing non-violent inmates from incarceration and putting them on parole. The Governor is planning to identify a group of non-violent inmates and put them on non-revocable parole. This means that if the person commits a new crime, it is not a parole violation, it is a new case. Under these circumstances, the majority of the costs fall on local government, not state government. I am an advocate for parole reform, but shifting costs and responsibility is not the answer.

Each year I can't imagine the budget situation getting any worse and every year it does. What makes it worse is every year the State legislature add fuel to the fire by cutting more holes in the safety net of local government, continuing fiscally irresponsible practices and passing the buck to the next group of legislators and the next generation of Californians. Next step fiscal implosion!

In the next segment, learn how the Governor has proposed “surgical” cuts that arbitrarily reduce spending on programs that help California’s neediest residents.

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