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California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation

Several Poor Administrative Practices Have Hindered Reductions in Recidivism and Denied Inmates Access to In-Prison Rehabilitation Programs

Background

To reduce the likelihood of inmates reoffending within three years of their release dates, the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (Corrections) began increasing inmates' access to in-prison rehabilitation programs to meet the needs of inmates before their release from one of 36 adult prisons across the State. Although the number of inmates housed in state prisons has decreased over the years, the recidivism rate for inmates in California has remained relatively constant. In addition to academic and vocational programs, Corrections has expanded to all prisons its cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) reentry programs, which are designed to correct an inmate's patterns of thinking and behavior. Corrections determines what in-prison rehabilitation programs inmates need through the assessments that it requires inmates to take upon entering an institution.

Key Recommendations

- The Legislature should require Corrections to establish performance targets for reducing recidivism and determining the programs' cost-effectiveness, and to partner with external researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of its rehabilitation programs.
- To ensure Corrections reduces recidivism, it should do the following:
 - » Validate its assessment tools to ensure they are reliable for assessing the needs of its inmates.
 - » Adequately oversee its vendors to ensure they teach only evidence-based curricula that effectively reduce recidivism.
 - » Meet its staffing-level goals for rehabilitative programming.
 - » Partner with a research organization to conduct a systematic evaluation to determine whether its programs are reducing recidivism and if they are cost effective.

Key Findings

- Corrections' CBT rehabilitation programs have not reduced recidivism—rates generally did not vary between the inmate group that had most of their rehabilitative needs met and the group that had no needs met.
 - » It has not evaluated how well it is assessing inmates' needs for years and risks placing inmates in rehabilitation programs that may not be the most effective for reducing their risk of reoffending.
 - » Due to lack of oversight by Corrections, a significant portion of the CBT curricula we reviewed were not evidence based or had not been evaluated and shown to have a positive impact on program participants.
- Corrections has neither placed inmates on program waiting lists appropriately nor assigned inmates to the programs necessary to address their rehabilitative needs—it failed to meet any rehabilitative needs for 62 percent of the inmates released in fiscal year 2017–18 who had been assessed with rehabilitation needs and a risk of reoffending.
 - » It has historically struggled with high staff vacancy rates for its academic and vocational education programs.
 - » Although it has expanded its rehabilitation programs to all 36 prisons, prison staff have not enrolled the maximum number of inmates in each class—for the three prisons we reviewed, the enrollment rate ranged from an average of 45 percent to 76 percent of capacity.
- Corrections has not established performance measures for its rehabilitation programs nor has it measured their cost effectiveness and thus does not know if its programs reduce recidivism.