

Dr. Silbert asks change in correction system

By Rusty Weston

Staff writer

EL CERRITO — Dr. Mimi Silbert, president of the Delancey Street Foundation, called for reforms in the state's correction system at a meeting of businessmen on Tuesday.

Silbert, 45, was the guest speaker at a monthly lunch sponsored by the West County Business and Professional Association at the Cerrito City Club. She used the forum to tout Delancey Street's 17-year-old program aimed at transforming the "permanent underclass" into functioning, law-abiding members of society.

"The criminal justice system creates a lifestyle of irresponsibility," Silbert said. "It teaches inmates to learn how to live in a closed environment, with no responsibilities."

While conceding that society has a legitimate need to punish felons and build prisons, Silbert, who holds doctorate degrees in criminology and psychology, said she prefers a program which teaches the down-and-out how to succeed in society.

"I think it's important that if you feel good about your life that you

act responsibly toward yourself," she said.

She said Delancey Street is self-supporting and accepts no government money. She said the \$6 million annual budget for the non-profit organization supports 700 men and women — predominantly illiterate, unskilled and veteran addicts when they enter the program.

The average resident stays four years, she said. During that time, the resident learns how to "break the destructive cycle" that got him there in the first place, she said.

The education process includes a mix of physical labor, clerical work and sales. She said the organization operates a moving company with 30 trucks, sells Christmas trees (including an El Cerrito location), and is the largest supplier of advertising novelties to American college campuses.

Delancey Street residents are advised not to drink or use illegal drugs, she said. Failure to adhere to that rule results in expulsion from the program. Other golden rules prohibit threatening violence or actual violence: either results in a resident's ouster.