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STATE PRISONS' REVOLVING DOOR Stepping Back Into Society

Gerald Miller, 47, is lanky, well spoken and smartly attired in a designer suit. If it weren't for the long scar along his neck, a legacy of 102 stitches after a knife fight at Folsom State Prison, you wouldn't suspect that he's served three prison stints totaling 15 years, on nearly a dozen felony convictions. "Before coming here," Miller says, "I only knew prison — that ugly, upside-down place where the nastier you are, the more you get along."

"Here" is Delancey Street, a large, bustling residential and retail center in San Francisco built to give hardened criminals, including "third-generation convicts who have a grandmother who deals," one last chance to turn their lives around, Miller says.

Since the 1970s, Delancey Street has helped thousands of seemingly incorrigible parolees become regular working stiffs: not angels, but making their own way. Like the wardens at San Quentin and the privately run women's prison at Live Oak, Delancey Street founder Mimi Silbert believes that the key to lowering repeat-offender rates lies in setting high expectations for convicts and making them live up to goals. As Silbert puts it, "Nobody feels good being a passive recipient of anything. We say ex-cons shouldn't be receiving, they should be giving."

Silbert and her students in what she calls a "Harvard for losers" built the rehabilitation facility in a once-decrepit warehouse district along San Francisco's Embarcadero in 1990. Today, the halfway house supports itself through private donations (Miller's suit among them) and resident-run businesses, including a gourmet restaurant and moving company in the Bay Area and a shuttle service for seniors and Christmas tree lots run by the organization's satellite campus in Los Angeles. Silbert's ex-cons aren't taking public assistance. They are working full days, learning what it's like to have a job. "They

earn their dignity," Silbert says. Her strategy offers a gold standard for making ex-cons fit to live in society again.

Shake-Up Needed

Whether Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger will side with the failed status quo or with reformers like Silbert is still unknown. The governor has already named someone new to the state's top prison job and settled a long-neglected lawsuit over treatment of suspected parole violators.

However, Roderick Q. Hickman, whom Schwarzenegger recently named director of the Youth and Adult Correctional Agency, is an unlikely candidate for blazing reformer: He has spent his entire 25-year career inside the state's Corrections Department. And the settlement was forced on the prisons department by a federal judge, not spearheaded by the governor.

To ensure that California's prison and parole systems start correcting instead of just warehousing criminals, state senators, at Hickman's upcoming confirmation hearing, should press him to take these concrete steps:

- Reverse the 37.2% raise over three years that then-Gov. Gray Davis gave the prison guards. The increase is not an entirely done deal. The Legislature has funded the first year, 7.4%. But it can withhold the remainder, sparing Californians an end cost of \$518 million a year.

- Remove Corrections Department Director Edward S. Alameida, known as "Dr. No" for his years of resistance to reforms. Consider as a replacement someone like Michael P. Jacobson, praised for reducing inmate violence, cutting employee overtime and reducing repeat-offender rates as New York City's corrections commissioner in the 1990s. Jacobson, now a professor of criminology, recently called California's prison and parole systems "insane, and begging for reform."

- Support a serious effort, with testing and visitor restrictions, to stop the rampant drug abuse that has turned some correctional facilities into virtual crack dens.

- Create strong incentives for inmates to better themselves. Like most states, California lets prisoners reduce their terms by earning credits for "good time." California, however, defines "good" as being quiet and not trying to escape. The system should also reward inmates for participating in the sort of education, job training and drug treatment programs that reduce parolees' chances of returning to crime.

A Safer State

There is no longer much disagreement between "liberal" crime experts such as Silbert and conservatives like former GOP state lawmaker Pat Nolan, who became president of a Christian prison reform group called the Justice Fellowship after serving 25 months in prison himself for racketeering. He says his key mission is to "hold offenders accountable to their victims and to society by providing them with opportunities to become productive, law-abiding citizens."

President Bush's point person on prisons, U.S. Assistant Atty. Gen. Deborah Daniels, said recently "there is simply no locking people up and throwing away the key. . . . [We must] monitor carefully and assist the re-entry of people into the community."

California's prison guards and their cronies in government are out of step with prison experts nationwide. What matters is not how tough prisons can be but whether prisoners can leave their cells with a stake in staying straight.

The inmate education, job and counseling programs profiled in this series, applied wisely, will not only reduce recidivism but make the state a safer place.

On the Web: Read the series at latimes.com/prisons.