

Delancey chief voices dissent at L.A. summit

Mimi Silbert urges state: 'Let's not lock them all up'

By Tupper Hull
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

HOLLYWOOD — Though they are few and far between, not everyone at Gov. Wilson's two-day crime summit supports harsher penalties for repeat offenders. Not everyone believes career criminal are without redemption.

"Please, let's not lock them all up," said Mimi Silbert, president of Delancey Street Foundation in San Francisco, a residential program for ex-cons, former prostitutes and recovering drug users.

"Let's intervene," she said. "Let's provide some kind of tough, family-based alternative that can teach them to live a life without drugs, a life without crime."

Silbert, however, was something of a lone voice in a crime conference that has focused heavily on tougher sentences and new laws. Wilson, and dozens of lawmakers, have reacted to increasing public concerns over crime by backing several measures to put criminals behind bars for increasingly long periods of time, including the popular "three strikes and you're out" initiative.

Though she never mentioned the "three strikes" measure, which would put three-time felons in prison for life, Silbert spoke directly to the get-tough-on-criminals sentiments that have dominated the summit.

"They are not afraid of prison," said Silbert, whose program teaches responsibility and job skills to criminals who want to start their lives anew. "They are comfortable in prison. And you pay for it. You pay for them to pump iron and let their violent values run the joint."

In the closest thing to an argument during the summit's opening day Monday, Silbert told Wilson: "There is a real question to me whether we can throw away the current generation of criminals and still save this younger generation. Many people think yes. I think no."

Silbert told the 500 participants the people who moved into Delancey Street were "the bottom of the barrel."

"Our average resident has been to prison four times," she said. "They come from disintegrated families and disintegrated communities. They live in despair and rage and hate. We have got to stop the hate or we can never save the next generation."

Responded Wilson: "We are running out of time. We are going to have to practice triage. With so

many demands and so limited resources, no one wants to write off any human beings, but ..."

The choice between prevention and detention "is a totally false choice," Wilson said. "We don't have a choice. We have to do both. We have to deal with today's criminal and imprison that criminal at the same time we deal with today's child to prevent him from becoming tomorrow's criminal."

Other participants in the discussion stressed that successful crime prevention programs required several years to bear results — time Wilson and other politicians facing tough re-election campaigns this year may not have.



Romesha Norwood, 12, holding a photo of a friend who died in a violent crime, attends a summit service Monday in Los Angeles.