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Opinion: Stop building prisons and invest in success

By Dorsey Nunn
Special to the Mercury News

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We are at a historic crossroads. The U.S. Supreme Court will hear arguments today about whether to uphold a federal court order that California reduce prison crowding.

No matter what that court decides, we are investing too many taxpayer dollars on a failing prison program. For example, California's 2011 budget makes \$1 billion in cuts to critical health and human services programs, while continuing to fund prison construction.

The business of prisons is personal to me.

I am a 58-year-old executive director of a nonprofit organization with a 30-year history. I have received numerous awards from county, state and federal government agencies for my work. I am a homeowner, taxpayer and voter. At age 19, I was sentenced to life in prison, but I was released on parole 10 years later. I attribute my success to my community, which opened their homes to me, gave me a job and stood by me.

Our office hears from prisoners every day. They tell us how it takes months to see a prison doctor, how they cannot get a diabetic diet, how they are harmed by botched surgeries. For older women, it is unbearably noisy to live in a cell with seven other women designed for four.

We hear from wives who are distraught that their incarcerated husbands are being shipped like cattle to states far away, so far that their children may never see them again. We get phone calls from people on parole who cannot find housing far enough away from schools and

parks, even though their crime had nothing to do with children.

I am struck by how few others benefit from my success and the successes of other formerly incarcerated people. A massive bureaucracy has been created that benefits from our failures. Police, parole, probation, lawyers and prison guards all remain employed if we fail. Manufacturers of police cars, electronic monitoring devices, uniforms and weaponry, prison construction companies and many other businesses all profit from crime.

The media focuses on parolees' failures, but not successes.

Every year, my organization holds a bike giveaway for children in low-income communities. We work hard to find a venue, solicit donations, purchase bikes, put them together, cook food and run the event. We send out news releases, but the story is rarely covered. Yet every day, the news is filled with crime stories. If the perpetrator is on parole, that fact is highlighted.

I recently visited three men I had served time with. They are still in prison, broken and dying old men. The state still considers them dangerous. Two need walkers to get across the room. They are all less healthy and seem much older than me. Prison accelerates aging by 10 years.

According to a recent corrections department report, the recidivism rate plummets for people older than 50. These studies represent real people,

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people I knew, people my staff visit and correspond with.

We are all concerned about public safety. But the studies that come across my desk tell me what I already know -- that people coming out of prison won't go back if we can provide them with the support they need to stabilize their lives, develop an income source and have access to medical care.

We have to invest in people's success. They cannot be expected to succeed on their own. We have to meet them halfway. But we will all benefit when we invest in success.

DORSEY NUNN is executive director of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, a San Francisco-based organization that advocates for the human rights of incarcerated parents, children, family members and people at risk of incarceration. He wrote this article for this newspaper.

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