

CAPITOL ALERT

Single-bed cells or close another prison? CA lawmakers weigh how to cut incarceration costs

By William Melhado

March 18, 2026 5:58 PM |  Gift Article

California lawmakers who want to cut down on the billions the state spends on incarceration face an uphill battle to reduce prison expenses, which have remained persistently high despite efforts to save money through prison closures and other cuts.

During a [Wednesday oversight hearing](#), assembly members expressed frustration with Newsom administration officials over the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's stubbornly large budget, which is effectively the same as was 20 years ago when the state's prison population was twice as large.

"At what point is it fair to continue to ask the Legislature to fund — I'll use the nicest word possible — the inefficiencies of CDCR at the cost of not providing support for other parts of our system?" Assemblymember Mia Bonta, D-Alameda, asked. "Is it another ten years we should wait for that?" Bonta criticized the department for hundreds of millions of dollars spent on fines and other legal fees related to CDCR's failure to comply with rulings in class-actions lawsuits related to inmate disabilities and healthcare.

CDCR Secretary Jeff Macomber noted that the portion of California's spending on his department from the General Fund has fallen from 9% to 6% over the past 20 year. He said several factors have contributed to CDCR's consistently large budget, including the state's aging prison population and infrastructure-related costs.

While the push to close prisons has resulted in savings for California, Macomber said it could lead to more overcrowding of existing facilities and make it more difficult to fulfill the department's mission of rehabilitating incarcerated people. He said when a prison is closed, individuals living in that facility are sent to another prison. Closures leads to more people sharing cells and longer waitlists for programming, both of which help with CDCR's rehabilitation efforts, Macomber said.

The secretary added that the Legislature should anticipate future budget requests from CDCR to make infrastructure improvements for prisons, including the installation of air conditioning and making facilities accessible to people with disabilities. A 2021 report from CDCR estimated

dozens of future projects across the state would cost \$1.1 billion and \$700 million more in deferred maintenance.

Closing prison saves money, but has tradeoffs

Some of Wednesday's discussions centered around the state's ongoing effort to save costs by closing prisons or certain correctional facilities. Macomber said those efforts, which have helped the state save \$1 billion annually, have made it more difficult to achieve some of the department's rehabilitation goals, such as housing individuals in single cells instead of assigning two people to a "60-square-foot cell."

Macomber noted that the department has made other efforts to improve rehabilitation of incarcerated people by making life in prison more closely resemble conditions outside correctional facilities. Single-bed rooms are an example of that, Macomber noted. Some of those changes have faced [stiff opposition from correctional staff](#).

Since 2021, the state has closed three prisons and is in the process of closing a Riverside County facility later this year. Last month, the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst's Office recommended [closing another prison](#) to save even more money. The LAO suggested the Correctional Training Facility in Soledad was a "strong candidate for closure" because it would allow the state to forgo paying for infrastructure projects at that facility.

Assemblymember Gregg Hart, D-Santa Barbara, said state leaders need to consider whether single-bed prison cells are the right long-term solution to increasing safety in CDCR facilities. California has long assigned two people to one cell in state prisons, but in recent years CDCR has worked to provide incarcerated individuals with their own cell. Officials did not provide an estimate of how much could be saved from making people share cells.

"On the other side, we have to look at the potential for closing facilities and saving money," Hart said. "This is a compound, complex problem and we need the information to be smart about that decision."

Hart, the chair of the Assembly accountability and oversight budget subcommittee, said in an interview after the hearing that he was encouraged that CDCR committed to producing a report about the most pressing capital-outlay projects needed to maintain facilities over the next 20 years.

Macomber said the department's costs related to education and healthcare for incarcerated individuals and workers' compensation costs for staff have all increased.

The department's focus on education for incarcerated people has paid off in some respects. Macomber said that only 6% of those who leave CDCR with an associates degree end up returning to prison. Those that leave prison with a bachelors or masters degree have a 0% recidivism rate, he said.

“It’s a hell of a return on investment,” he said.

Cost saving efforts have fallen short

The corrections department faces a structural deficit from higher than expected costs related to staff overtime, accrued vacation payout when employees leave civil service, medical services and higher than anticipated legal fees, among other payments.

That shortfall has been exacerbated by the fact that in an attempt to cut down on costs, the state has eliminated vacant positions within CDCR, decreasing the amount of money the department has to buffer its budget.

The state has made multiple attempts to identify areas where CDCR could cut costs, including awarding [a \\$20 million contract](#) to the Boston Consulting Group to find efficiencies in CDCR and other large state departments.

At the hearing, there was bipartisan skepticism over the contract. Assemblymember Tom Lackey, R-Palmdale, expressed shock at the contract’s cost and the lack of reporting by BCG, noting that the roughly \$810 million estimated in savings was remarkably less than the \$2.1 billion BCG originally forecast it could cut from CDCR’s budget.

“The fact that we contracted \$20 million, and we’re woefully short on what (savings) we were told it would result in,” Lackey said. “This was a failure in my opinion.”

Earlier this month, the LAO [issued a report](#) that raised transparency concerns about the BCG contract. The LAO noted that in the administration’s latest status report, it was not clear whether changes had been made or if the state was on pace to achieve the anticipated saving in this fiscal year.

Caitlin O’Neil, an analyst with the LAO, said that other, previous efforts to find efficiencies in state government have failed to reach the stated goals. O’Neil recommended lawmakers view future savings proposals from Gov. Gavin Newsom’s administration skeptically.

“While we certainly agree that seeking efficiencies is good,” O’Neil said, “recent efforts have fallen short of what was assumed in the budget, which muddies the Legislature’s understanding of the fiscal health of the state.”