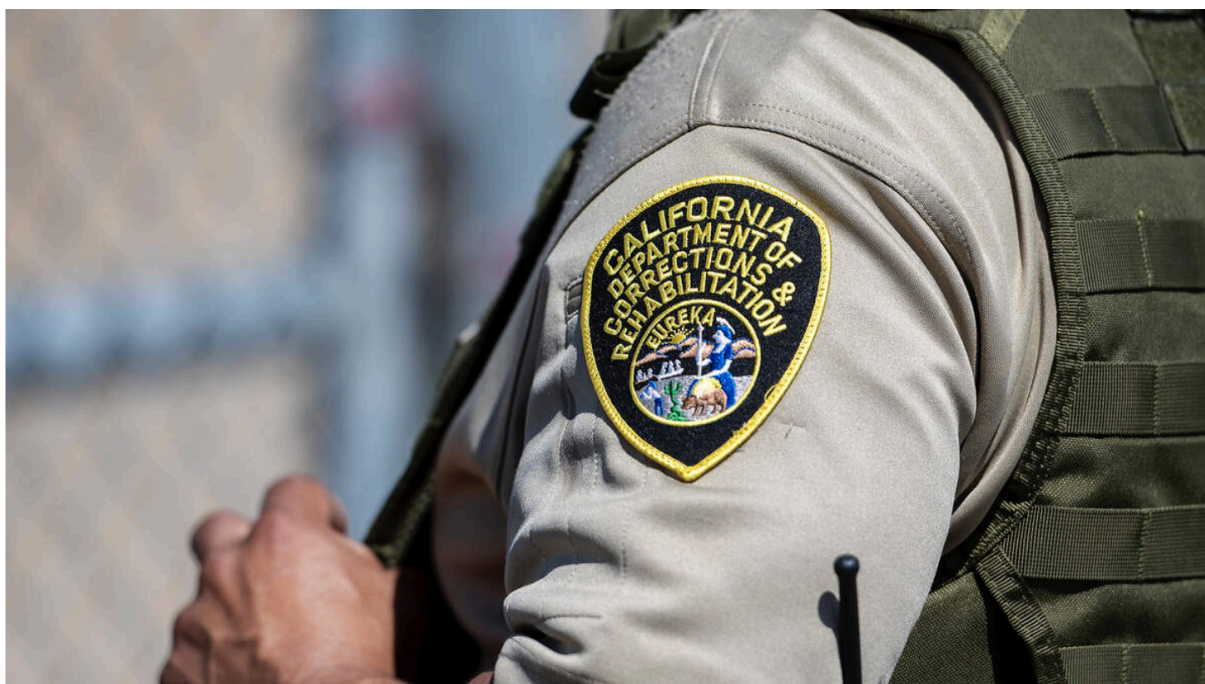


California's Legislature is eager to close another prison. Newsom may not be

By William Melhado

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Part of California lawmakers' [adopted \\$356 billion state budget](#) includes savings from the planned closure of another state prison — one of the few reliable ways to trim the state's corrections spending.

But the Legislature still needs to get Gov. Gavin Newsom on board.

With the scheduled closure of a prison in Riverside County later this year, Newsom will have closed five prisons during his tenure. And based on the May revision Newsom proposed last month, it does not appear the governor is eager to shut down another facility in the coming fiscal year.

"In the coming days, discussions with the Legislature will continue on resolving the outstanding differences between the two versions of the budget," Finance Department spokesperson HD Palmer said in a statement.

During a [May budget hearing](#), a finance official said the administration is already in the process of shuttering the California Rehabilitation Center in Norco and planning to close two facilities in

a single fiscal year “would be a really big undertaking” for the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

Despite California’s incarcerated population shrinking by half over the last 20 years, the state’s prison spending remains persistently high, largely due to employee compensation and rising healthcare costs. The Newsom administration has attempted creative efforts to shrink CDCR’s budget, such as hiring outside consultants to find operations efficiencies, but those endeavors have resulted in [less savings than initially anticipated](#).

Sen. Laura Richardson, D-San Pedro, who chairs a Senate budget subcommittee on corrections, said in an interview that California has roughly 9,000 extra beds and plenty of space that would allow it to safely close another prison.

Richardson said there has not been a date set, or a specific prison identified for closure, but she and her colleagues hope to move forward with shutting another facility in next year’s budget.

Earlier this year, the nonpartisan Legislative Analyst’s Office [recommended closing](#) the Correctional Training Facility in Soledad to avoid expensive infrastructure repairs.

Asked whether the governor is receptive to the Legislature’s proposal, Richardson said she thinks the Newsom administration understands that prison costs need to be cut but did not indicate that the Legislature and the governor have found agreement on the issue. She noted that closing prisons could result in [fewer opportunities](#) for incarcerated people to have their own cells.

The union that represents correctional officers has a simple message for those hoping to keep closing prisons.

“The Legislature’s plan to close another state prison is a bad idea. They’ve promised their constituents a system that does a better job preparing people in prison to come home rehabilitated. They can’t keep that promise while continuing to shut down the places where that work is done,” California Correctional Peace Officers Association President Neil Flood said in a statement.

Flood said the savings weren’t even that significant given California spends billions on corrections and closing a facility is estimated to save the state \$150 million.

The loss of stable jobs in communities where prisons are located requires prison staff to either transfer facilities or find employment elsewhere. The number of staffers working in each of California’s 31 prisons [ranges between](#) 1,000 and 2,000 depending on the facility’s size.

Despite Newsom’s track record of closing facilities, CCPOA has been a strong supporter of the governor. Since he was elected, CCPOA has given Newsom millions, [including over \\$1.7 million](#) to support the governor’s 2021 anti-recall campaign.

But advocates for prison closure argue that the upcoming budget, which is Newsom's last, is a good opportunity to continue shutting down facilities and lowering CDCR's budget.

"We're still scraping for dollars for programs that are vital for folks, and so we're really hoping that the governor sees this opportunity to save some funds for the people," said Amber-Rose Howard, the executive director of Californians United for a Responsible Budget, a nonprofit that advocates for reducing prison spending by decreasing the state's incarcerated population.

But Howard said she was not sure Newsom would agree to close another prison.

"He's been so hesitant and kind of tiptoeing around prison closure this year," she said. "The Legislature is setting him up to do it beautifully. They're giving him the backing."

Howard said she was also supportive of the Legislature's proposal to reject additional funding for a single cell "honor housing unit" at Corcoran State Prison that the governor proposed in his latest budget proposal.

The governor proposed an additional \$10 million in the upcoming budget to help pay for this effort as part of the broader criminal justice reform effort known as the California Model. CURB and the Legislature both oppose this proposal.

"We need to keep closed yards closed and actually figure out how to stop doing these sorts of 'swiss-cheese' prisons, and figure out how to close full prisons and maximize spaces on the prisons that remain open," Howard said.

Reporter Stephen Hobbs contributed to this story.