



State of California

OFFICE OF THE INSPECTOR GENERAL

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The state's substance abuse treatment programs for inmates do not reduce recidivism, yet cost the state \$143 million per year

SACRAMENTO—California has spent more than \$1 billion since 1989 to provide substance abuse treatment to California inmates and parolees in an effort to reduce the state's high recidivism rate—but the programs have had no effect on recidivism, and in that regard, appear to represent a complete waste of money, the Office of the Inspector General said today.

“Effective treatment for substance abuse offers one of the state's best hopes of reducing the number of inmates who repeatedly cycle in and out of prisons,” said Inspector General Matthew Cate. “Successful treatment programs could reduce the cost to society of criminal activity related to drug abuse, change lives, and help relieve the state's prison overcrowding crisis. But so far the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation has squandered that opportunity,” Cate said.

The reason, according to Cate, boils down to poor management of substance abuse treatment programs by the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation and the Office of Substance Abuse Programs, which was established by the department in 1989 to develop and manage alcohol and drug programs for inmates. As just one example of that mismanagement, he noted, the department has paid for extensive studies of the programs over the past several years, but has never taken steps to correct problems that came to light from those efforts.

According to the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, more than 36,000 of the state's 172,500 inmates—21 percent of the adult prison population—are serving prison terms for drug

offenses. An even higher percentage reportedly has underlying substance abuse problems. A recent University of California study estimated that 42 percent of California inmates have a “high need” for alcohol treatment and 56 percent have a high need for drug treatment. Recidivism rates for California inmates in general continue to be among the highest in the country.

In a 50-page special review released Wednesday, the Office of the Inspector General reported that numerous university studies of the state’s in-prison substance abuse programs conducted over the past nine years consistently show no difference in recidivism rates between inmates who participated in the programs and those who received no substance abuse treatment. One five-year University of California, Los Angeles, study of the state’s two largest in-prison programs found, in fact, that the 12-month recidivism rates for inmates who received in-prison treatment was slightly *higher* than that of a control group.

Another recent study showed that inmates who received in-prison treatment followed by at least 90 days of community-based aftercare did have significantly lower recidivism rates than non-participants. But only 30 percent of parolees who received in-prison treatment attended aftercare, and fewer than 10 percent attended aftercare for at least 90 days.

The Office of Substance Abuse Programs spends \$143 million a year on substance abuse treatment for inmates and parolees. About 25 percent of the total—\$36 million—is budgeted for in-prison substance abuse treatment for inmates, while another 42 percent is allocated to community-based aftercare services for parolees. The remainder is spent on other drug treatment programs and administration.

In-prison substance abuse treatment services are provided to inmates through 38 programs located at 22 prisons throughout the state. The programs are operated by private organizations under contracts managed by the Office of Substance Abuse Programs. Together, the programs have the capacity to provide services to about 9,200 inmates. According to the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, an estimated 78,000 California inmates have participated in in-prison substance abuse treatment since the programs began in 1989.

In the report issued today, the Office of the Inspector General pointed to what it termed “a multitude of reasons” to explain the failure of the state’s in-prison substance abuse programs. One central finding is that even though the contracts with the providers require contractors to use the “therapeutic community” treatment model, the Office of Substance Abuse Programs has placed

the programs in prison settings that make it difficult or impossible for the therapeutic community model to operate. As a result, many of the contractors fall far short of providing genuine therapeutic community programs—so much so that University of California, Los Angeles, researchers concluded after one study that the programs reflect a therapeutic community “in name only.”

For example, the therapeutic community treatment model calls for participants to be separated from other inmates so as to foster a supportive therapeutic environment. Yet, participants at 36 of the state’s 38 programs share yards and other prison facilities with general population inmates, which allows security procedures affecting those inmates to disrupt program operations. In addition, eight of the programs—representing 24 percent of the state’s in-prison substance abuse beds—are located in facilities subject to frequent or long-term lockdowns that prevent participants from attending program activities.

The Office of the Inspector General reported that the Office of Substance Abuse Programs also has failed to hold providers responsible for fulfilling contract terms, which include providing at least 20 hours a week of face-to-face group and individual activities and maintaining an 18:1 ratio of participants to counselors. And even though the use of intensive group counseling—encounter groups—is central to the therapeutic community model, the contracts with the providers do not specify how many of the program hours should be devoted to encounter groups. As a result, 13 of the programs devote less than 25 percent of treatment hours to intensive group therapy and several devote less than 10 percent of available time to encounter group sessions.

The Office of the Inspector General reported that the bidding method used by the Office of Substance Abuse Programs to select in-prison substance abuse treatment contractors is also questionable. The process unnecessarily restricts competition and may eliminate the best-qualified providers by setting minimum and maximum bid amounts that in most cases differ by only 5 percent. The bidding method provides little price competition, the Inspector General said, often results in only one bid or in multiple bids at the minimum amount, and fails to ensure that the state receives the highest quality services for the lowest possible price.

Many of the problems in the state’s in-prison substance abuse treatment programs have been identified before. The Office of the Inspector General noted that the Office of Substance Abuse Programs paid the University of California, Los Angeles and San Diego State University more than \$8.2 million between 1997 and 2006 to evaluate the programs. As a result of those studies,

the University of California, Los Angeles has issued more than 20 reports, which in numerous instances identified program weaknesses and made recommendations for improvements. Yet, the Office of Substance Abuse Programs has not taken action to correct the deficiencies, but rather simply continues to expand the programs and to fund additional studies.

“The importance of these issues and the enormity of the problems demand a response that reaches beyond the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation,” said Inspector General Cate.

“We recommend that state officials and policymakers work in a bipartisan manner to devise comprehensive solutions—bringing together substance abuse treatment experts and representatives from a broad political spectrum to remake the system from the ground up,” Cate said.

“The goal should be nothing short of making California a leader in addressing the crippling problem of criminal activity related to chronic substance abuse and its far-reaching implications for public safety and societal well-being.”

The full text of the Inspector General’s special review of the state’s in-prison substance abuse treatment programs can be viewed and downloaded from the Office of the Inspector General’s website at <http://www.oig.ca.gov/>. To view the report, go the home page and click on the report title, “Special Review Into In-Prison Substance Abuse Programs Managed by the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation” (February 2007) or click on the link “Bureau of Audits and Investigations, Audits, Special Reviews, and Investigations” to access the report under the title: “In-Prison Substance Abuse Programs Managed by the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, Special Review Into,” (February 2007).

The Office of the Inspector General is an independent state agency responsible for oversight of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. The office carries out its mission by conducting audits, special reviews, and investigations of the department to uncover criminal conduct, administrative wrongdoing, poor management practices, waste, fraud, and other abuses by staff, supervisors, and management. The special review was conducted under the authority provided to the Inspector General in California Penal Code section 6126.

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