

Prison transfers hurt kids, families

By Chris Levister

Special to Sentinel-Voice

RIVERSIDE, Calif. (NNPA) - A California Superior Court judge recently tossed out Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's plan to solve the state's severe prison overcrowding by transferring inmates out of state.

Two labor unions that represent correctional officers and other prison employees had sued to block the transfers. So far, 360 prisoners have been relocated.

The ruling by Judge Gail D. Ohanesian, who acknowledged a "climate of peril" in the prisons, comes as the state is under federal order to ease "dangerously" overcrowded conditions or face strict limits on new admissions.

Eliminating the option could lead to some inmates being released early and other convicts being held at county jails.

In a statement, Schwarzenegger called the ruling "an unacceptable threat to public safety," adding, "I will not release dangerous criminals to relieve overcrowding."

While families of inmates like James W. agree prison conditions warrant immediate action, many say the transfers punish the whole family.

"What about the inmate's families? What will become of their children?" asks Malisa Oliver of Rialto, Calif.

Oliver remembers the look on her 7-year-old cousin's face when he pressed his forehead against the inch thick window that separated him from his father James W. who is serving a 10-year sentence at the Chino Men's Prison for multiple nonviolent drug offenses.

"He said, 'Daddy, why are you leaving us?' He pounded on the glass petition with his fists and shouted, 'It's not fair. You can't leave me.'"

Oliver could only watch and wipe tears from the child's eyes. "It's like a second death."

Thirty-two-year old James W. is one of more than 400 inmates who volunteered to be transferred to out-of-state private facilities in Arizona, Oklahoma and Mississippi. James W. told family members conditions at the Chino prison are "dangerous, inhumane and shackle his hopes for rehabilitation."

"He told us he sleeps in a triple bunk bed in the middle of a packed gym. He says he lies awake at night poised to defend himself against violent inmates.

He says the place is a powder keg. He just wants to get the hell out of there," according to Oliver.

James W. requested transfer after Gov. Schwarzenegger issued an emergency executive order authorizing voluntary and involuntary transfers.

Oliver said James W. viewed videotapes of the more favorable living conditions in out-of-state prisons.

"In one videotape, a former California inmate boasts about having television selections that include ESPN."

"Up to half of all male children of prisoners will go on to commit crimes themselves, perpetuating a cycle that will feed the prison boom for generations to come," said Denise Johnson, head of the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents.

Oliver said her young cousin, like many children of prisoners, grew up in foster care with grandparents and other relatives, bouncing among an array of temporary caretakers. Two years ago, the 7-year-old boy began visiting his father every other week, said Oliver.

"He was like a kid going to see the Easter Bunny. He would get all cleaned up, take his homework, and they'd work through math problems. His grades not only got better, he looked forward to going to class."

Oliver says the child is now visibly depressed and angry.

"Transferring inmates who have adolescent children is physically and emotionally hard on their families, who already have a difficult time visiting them in local prisons," said Oliver.

Johnson says overcrowded prison conditions also place an unfair burden on inmates because so many of them are incarcerated in remote facilities, hours from their children's homes and have no one willing or able to bring the children to visit.

Across the country, an estimated 1.5 million children have a parent behind bars, an increase of more than half a million since 1991, according to the Federal Bureau of Justice Statistics.

The result is what Linda Carson — a former inmate and daughter of an inmate calls "the largest separation of families since slavery."

"Minority children are hit particularly hard: Nearly half the parents behind bars are Black and another 25 percent are Hispanic," said Carson who runs the prison support organization Kids of Prison Parents.

Carson says the social cost of jailing small-time criminals like James W., and

of relegating their children to the juvenile justice and social welfare bureaucracies, goes well beyond the crisis of overcrowding.

"The children of prisoners are 'at risk' for just about everything a child can be at risk for: truancy, gang involvement, drug use and sexual abuse. Inmates end up punishing their children and other family members for the sake of their own safety."

Researchers believe that more than 10 million kids

have experienced the incarceration of a parent at some point in their lives. Many like Oliver's young cousin, continue to feel the repercussions of that loss.

"These children are made virtual orphans by the drug war and other 'tough-on-crime' measures that have sent the prison population skyrocketing to record levels," said Carson.

"For children of nonviolent drug offenders in particular, the experience of los-

ing a parent can be morally and emotionally corrosive. They end up losing respect for 'authority,' that in their eyes, has shown their parents so little in the way of justice."

Carson says family bonds are being severed by design.

"Moving inmates thousands of miles from their children and families who are, in most cases, their only support, is pouring salt in an open wound."

Chris Levister writes for Black Voice News.

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