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California corrections secretary seeks to 'smooth the bumps' of realignment

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Matt Cate, secretary of the state Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, may have the toughest job in state government. His mandate: overseeing a massive downsizing of the \$10 billion agency by shifting some prison and parole tasks to counties.

The federal court has ordered the state to ease prison overcrowding. The state budget requires the "realignment," which also is forcing the department to cut state jobs.

Realignment launched Oct. 1. The Bee recently interviewed Cate at his Sacramento office.

How is realignment going so far?

It's going along as expected. We knew that changes of this magnitude and complexity weren't going to be easy. There are a thousand details to try to get right. We're working every day to smooth out the bumps in the road.

How will the public be able to gauge whether this works?

We were facing a prisoner release (court) order on the magnitude of about 35,000 inmates. That's (like) emptying seven prisons onto the streets. So if we avoid an early release order from the Supreme Court, that will be a sign of success.

We know prison spending has been growing at an unsustainable rate. If we see that coming down ... that will be a sign of success.

And if we see recidivism rates reduced from the neighborhood of 70 percent, then we'll know the counties are fulfilling their promise, which has been, "We can do this better."

How is department morale?

As I talk to employees, they're concerned about their future. They're worried about their families.

But we've been able to work out (labor) agreements (that include) voluntary moves from overstaffed prisons to prisons where we're understaffed. We're also trying to reduce staffing levels over time, which will minimize the impact.

This is actually an opportunity to remake the prisons. For the first time there's a chance to run them the way they were designed.

Might this prod more long-serving employees to retire?

It might. That's a mixed bag for me. It makes room for some of the younger employees to stay on. On the other hand, you lose a great deal of experience.

One of the things that makes California unique is that we pay our officers and free staff pretty well compared to the rest of the country, so our longevity and experience levels are the best in the nation. That's how you're able to run a prison at 195 percent of design capacity. I hate to lose that.

What will work be like for those who remain?

There will be less overtime. ... You'll have to adjust your lifestyle if you're making your boat payment with overtime every month.

(Prison employees) will have to get used to working in institutions without massive inmate turnover. Last year we had 47,000 inmates serve 90 days or less.

The first weekend of realignment, if you worked at (the prison) down in Chino, you would have expected 10 buses from LA County that weekend. Instead, we had four.

If you work in parole, you're going to have different responsibilities. The lower-level offenders won't be on your caseload.

Some of the guys hardest to supervise – the drug addicts and the property crime guys – will be handled by counties. We'll have the hard-core guys, and I think our team does a really great job with those kinds of people.