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## Chuck Alexander: Governor stiff-arms prison officers' ideas to save money

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While Sacramento police and firefighters are receiving accolades from local officials for making contract concessions during tough times, our governor has summarily rejected any and all attempts by California correctional peace officers to do the same.

With California now reduced to passing out IOUs to cover its growing debts and its credit rating in free fall, the governor's refusal to even consider, let alone enact, any of these cost-saving proposals is puzzling.

We recently offered to reduce future pension obligations, alter sick leave provisions and make other contractual changes that would save California taxpayers more than a billion dollars annually, all of which were flatly rejected by the Schwarzenegger administration. Shortly before, we urged the governor to trim the prison bureaucracy, which has nearly doubled at a time when the state's prison population has increased 8 percent. Even the governor's former acting corrections director said the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation "is bloated and unwieldy, generating significant waste." The governor's response was to begin furloughing officers, essentially cutting the muscle instead of the fat.

It's not the first time this governor has turned a deaf ear to our recommendations for reducing the high cost of operating California prisons. Two years ago, we detailed ways the state could save hundreds of millions of dollars by trimming the prison bureaucracy and streamlining operations. Two months ago, we offered other suggestions for cutting prison costs, including limiting inmate health care costs to the same level as Medi-Cal patients, which would ensure adequate care for inmates while saving taxpayers over a billion dollars annually. In neither case would the governor nor his prison officials meet to discuss these ideas.

Our most recent offer was intended to avoid the traditional protracted – and sometimes contentious – bargaining process, which can take many months and sometimes years to complete. Given the state's four-alarm fiscal emergency, this streamlined approach is more than justified.

The cost-savings we proposed are precisely the kind of outside-the-box ideas that can help get spending under control without punishing taxpayers by jeopardizing public safety. But for a governor who vowed to "blow up the boxes," he has been strangely disinterested. Rather than working with us as a team, he's opting to remain on the bench.

Our ideas would generate significant savings for California taxpayers – far more than any savings being produced by the governor's furlough program, which is creating an unfunded liability of staggering proportions that will only add to California's long-term fiscal instability. Moreover, our proposals would save money without further endangering our officers or the citizens we are sworn to protect. This is an important point for us. When the governor took office, an average of nine correctional officers were being assaulted every day inside California prisons. Today, 25 officers are being assaulted, the result of staff cuts and the governor's failure to fill officer vacancies.

As correctional officers – and taxpayers – we urge the governor to step outside the box.

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*Chuck Alexander is executive vice president of the California Correctional Peace Officers Association.*