

SENATE THIRD READING

SB 551 (Cortese)

As Amended June 10, 2025

Majority vote

SUMMARY

Codifies the principles of normalization and dynamic security, two of the four pillars of the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation's (CDCR) California Model.

Major Provisions

- 1) States that the Legislature finds and declares that the purpose of incarceration is rehabilitation accomplished only if the period of imprisonment is used to maximize personal growth for all residents and facilitate their reintegration into society upon release, enabling them to lead law-abiding and self-sufficient lives, reducing recidivism.
- 2) States that the Legislature finds and declares that community-based organizations are an integral part of achieving the state's objective of ensuring that all people incarcerated in a state prison have access to rehabilitative programs.
- 3) States that the Legislature recognizes that life in prison can never be the same as life in a free society. However, active steps should be taken to make conditions in prison as close to normal life as possible, aside from loss of liberty, and to ensure that this normalization does not lead to inhumane prison conditions.
- 4) Provides that it is the intent of the Legislature that CDCR integrate, to the extent possible, the principles of normalization and dynamic security to establish safer conditions for incarcerated persons and correctional staff.
- 5) Provides that the Legislature recognizes that the principle of dynamic security promotes a healthier environment for correctional officers, staff, and individuals within a correctional facility by improving the relationship between incarcerated individuals and staff. Improved communication, mentorship, and normalization improve health outcomes for department staff and incarcerated individuals by reducing risks such as violent behavior, recidivism, and stress.
- 6) Provides that the Legislature recognizes the principle of normalization, which states that life inside prison should be as close to life outside of prison as possible, and should prepare incarcerated persons to be productive and contributing members of society upon their release.
- 7) Requires CDCR to maintain a mission statement consistent with the principles of normalization and dynamic security, and to facilitate access for community-based programs.
- 8) Provides that CDCR should develop training for all correctional staff on the principles of normalization and dynamic security in order to meaningfully effectuate the principles set forth in this section.
- 9) Provides that, in implementing the objective of facilitating the successful reintegration of individuals in CDCR's care back into their communities, CDCR is encouraged to allow all

incarcerated persons the opportunity to enroll in programs that promote successful return to the community.

10) Contains other legislative findings and declarations.

COMMENTS

The California Model: On March 17, 2023, Governor Gavin Newsom announced a historic commitment to safety and justice, "the California Model," to include the transformation of San Quentin Rehabilitation Center. On April 4, 2023, the Secretary of CDCR and the federal Receiver who oversees prison medical care issued a joint memorandum expressing their concern that prison environments can be unfavorable to the health and well-being of the people who live and work in them and operate at cross purposes to rehabilitative efforts. A multi-disciplinary Advisory Council was tasked with drafting and presenting recommendations to achieve cultural and transformational change within the prison and help inform CDCR's California Model.

Working with these multidisciplinary experts and drawing from international best practices, CDCR has since begun implementing the California Model to transform the experience of living and working in CDCR facilities. The California Model is based on four foundational pillars meant to improve the health and well-being of people who live and work within CDCR institutions. These pillars are: dynamic security, normalization, peer-mentorship, and becoming a trauma-informed organization. Dynamic security is an approach that promotes positive relationships between staff and incarcerated people accomplished through purposeful activities and professional, positive, and respectful communication. Normalization aims to bring life in prison as close as possible to life outside of prison because the more life in prison resembles life in the community, the easier it will be for people to transition and adjust to life in the community upon release. Peer mentorship seeks to train incarcerated individuals to use their lived experiences to mention and support their peers. Finally, the goal of becoming a trauma informed organization is to educate staff at all levels to recognize the impacts of trauma to ensure the physical and emotional safety of all staff and incarcerated individuals. CDCR has partnered with the Amend program at the University of California, San Francisco, and has sent people in leadership positions to Norway to learn how their approach to normalcy and dynamic security in corrections and rehabilitation is lowering recidivism and expanding employee wellness.

This bill focuses on two of the California Model pillars, normalization and dynamic security. This bill would recognize and codify these principles. This bill directs CDCR to include the principles of normalization and dynamic security in its mission statement. This bill would also direct CDCR to develop training for all correctional staff to teach these principles.

In August 2023, staff from CA Model test sites received extensive introductory Resource Team training to develop operational skills and understand California Model safety requirements. In March 2024, all Resource Teams began activities with high-risk populations to reduce violence against staff and provide a safer environment for both the staff and population. The concepts of dynamic security, normalization, and progression were incorporated into required training for all staff in January 2024. CDCR is also currently rolling out "contact staff training" which gives staff with tools, knowledge, and skills to more effectively engage in healthy communications and dynamic security. CDCR began contact staff training in January of 2025 and it will continue throughout the calendar year.

With regards to normalization, one of the California Model goals currently being is to house more incarcerated in individual cells. This approach allows for greater privacy, less interpersonal conflict, and better conditions for reflection and rehabilitation. The Governor's January budget proposes that CDCR offer increased levels of single-celled housing at the San Quentin Rehabilitation Center, the California Correctional Women's Facility, and the California Institution for Women. CDCR believes that single-celled housing will directly enhance the well-being of the incarcerated population by lessening the density housed within the prison and increasing access to programming opportunities. Other ongoing normalization efforts include beautification projects, activities where staff and the population can participate together, improving visiting facilities, and construction of a new education center at San Quentin State Prison in order to expand rehabilitative programming opportunities.

As noted above, this bill would codify the principles of dynamic security and normalization. It is unclear why the two remaining pillars, peer mentorship and becoming a trauma-informed organization are not being codified. For example, many of the community based organizations who run programs within CDCR are peer mentors and that is one of the reasons why these programs can be so effective. In addition, CDCR has created a Peer Support Specialist certification managed by the California Mental Health Services Authority. CDCR is training and paying incarcerated individuals to obtain that certification to support their peers as they cope with life in prison. These principles also seem to be in line with the goals of this bill—to promote personal growth for all residents and ultimately reduce recidivism. [citations omitted]

According to the Author

"National research has shown that incarceration negatively impacts the physical and mental health of correctional officers, department of corrections staff, and incarcerated individuals. These effects are apparent in correctional officers whose average life expectancy is just 59 years old, 16 years shorter than those not working in corrections; for every year of imprisonment, an incarcerated individual's life expectancy decreases by two years.

"It is imperative that we improve our correctional system to promote well-being and harm reduction. As 95% of incarcerated individuals are released from prison back into the community, we must work towards replicating conditions as close to normal life as possible to achieve safe reentry and reduce recidivism. SB 551 codifies the principles of normalization and dynamic security to foster a safer rehabilitative culture within California's Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR). These principles are key components of the safest prisons in the world and encourage a healthier environment for both correctional staff and incarcerated individuals."

Arguments in Support

According to *Initiate Justice*, "National research shows the average life expectancy of correctional officers is 59 years old, 16 years shorter than those not working in corrections. Additionally, suicide rates of correctional officers are 39% higher than the national working age population. Among incarcerated individuals, every year of imprisonment decreases their life expectancy by two years. Further, in 2022, the suicide rate of incarcerated people increased 4.6 points.

"SB 551 introduces the principles of Normality and Dynamic Security to CDCR. Normality not only emulates life outside of a facility on the inside, in the most secure manner possible, but prepares individuals for adequate civic engagement. Moreover, Dynamic Security creates a healthier prison environment through the use of ongoing, respectful communication between

staff and residents—reducing the risk of stress, violence, and recidivism for greater public safety."

Arguments in Opposition

According to *California Civil Liberties Advocacy*, "We respectfully object to one particular policy statement found in both the legislative findings and amended Penal Code §1170(a)(1), which reads:

"Active steps should be taken to make conditions in prison as close to normal life as possible, aside from loss of liberty."

"This sentence, in our view, is vague, overbroad, and utopian in character. While well-meaning, it lacks definitional guardrails and measurable standards, leaving open a wide range of interpretations. The phrase "as close to normal life as possible" really is begging the question since the metric by which a "normal life" may be very different, depending on a person's individual background, economic status, housing, employment, geographical location, and et cetera.

"Life outside prison in the modern era could include watching TikTok or Instagram videos, engaging on other social media platforms, planning social outings with friends, or participating in consumer-driven lifestyles that are inherently incompatible with correctional settings. Without clarification, the statement risks conflating rehabilitation with comfort or entitlement and may inadvertently erode public trust in the very legitimacy or purpose of incarceration itself.

"Another critical concern raised by the broad phrasing to "to make conditions in the prison as close to normal life as possible" is whether this aspirational policy would apply equally and without distinction to individuals convicted of the most serious and violent offenses, including murder, rape, kidnapping, and serial crimes. The bill does not make clear whether normalization principles would be tiered based on offense severity, custody level, or demonstrated rehabilitation progress. This opens the door to potential policy extensions that could normalize prison life even for high-risk offenders - many of whom pose ongoing safety concerns or have inflicted irreversible harm on victims and their families.

"While we affirm the right of all incarcerated individuals to basic human dignity, not all inmates are similarly situated, and the public has a right to expect that individuals convicted of the gravest offenses will face conditions appropriately distinct from everyday civilian life. Failing to draw this line risks undermining proportionality in sentencing and diminishing the seriousness with which our justice system treats the most egregious harms.

"We do not believe that prison should emulate civilian life broadly. We believe rehabilitation and accountability are compatible, but prison is still a form of consequence and should not become indistinguishable from freedom except in physical movement. Stripping liberty is not the only consequence of a criminal sentence – it is the organizing principle around which other consequences follow. To suggest that all other conditions should be normalized minimizes the serious nature of the underlying offenses that led to incarceration."

FISCAL COMMENTS

According to the Assembly Appropriations Committee, "Cost pressures (General Fund) of an unknown but potentially significant amount to CDCR. CDCR reports no significant fiscal impact resulting from the bill; the department believes its existing staff trainings fulfill its obligations under the bill and reports it already "works to remove barriers to accessing rehabilitative programming through the use dynamic security and strives to create institutional conditions that closely resemble life in the community." However, to the extent CDCR must change its facilities, practices, and policies to meet the goals of normalization and dynamic security codified by this bill, the department will likely incur significant future costs given the scope of its operations."

VOTES**SENATE FLOOR: 28-10-2**

YES: Allen, Archuleta, Arreguín, Ashby, Becker, Blakespear, Cabaldon, Caballero, Cervantes, Cortese, Durazo, Gonzalez, Grayson, Hurtado, Laird, McGuire, McNerney, Menjivar, Padilla, Pérez, Richardson, Rubio, Smallwood-Cuevas, Stern, Umberg, Wahab, Weber Pierson, Wiener

NO: Alvarado-Gil, Choi, Dahle, Grove, Jones, Niello, Ochoa Bogh, Seyarto, Strickland, Valladares

ABS, ABST OR NV: Limón, Reyes

ASM PUBLIC SAFETY: 7-2-0

YES: Schultz, Mark González, Haney, Harabedian, Nguyen, Ramos, Sharp-Collins

NO: Alanis, Lackey

ASM APPROPRIATIONS: 11-4-0

YES: Wicks, Arambula, Calderon, Caloza, Elhawary, Fong, Mark González, Ahrens, Pacheco, Pellerin, Solache

NO: Sanchez, Dixon, Ta, Tangipa

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