

# New prison pharmacy to stem deaths

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By Josh McCoy ([jmccoy@ledger-dispatch.com](mailto:jmccoy@ledger-dispatch.com))

A new \$15 million system for sorting pills in state prisons was launched this month at Mule Creek State Prison as part of an overhaul in prison health care being carried out by Robert Sillen, a receiver who took over last year at the orders of Federal Judge Thelton Henderson.

The pharmacy program came on the heels of a study by Sillen, also published this month, that found that 66 of the 440 deaths in adult prisons last year were preventable or possibly preventable. In one instance, mismanaged prescriptions led to a patient dying of asthma after prison health care workers failed to get steroids to him in a timely manner, according to Rachael Kagan, a spokesperson for Sillen.

"We have found that people are dying needlessly because medical care is poor," Kagan said. "The results were pretty much the same as what the court found in 2000."

Kagan referred to the class action law suit, *Plata v. Schwarzenegger*, in which Judge Henderson deemed California's prison medicine to be "cruel and unusual" and in violation of the eighth amendment to the U.S. Constitution. When state officials failed, after several years, to improve health care in compliance with that ruling, the judge stripped the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation of its authority and created the receivership.

Since Sillen started in April 2006, with no limits on his budget, he has enlarged prisons, raised staff salaries, bought ambulances, hired 500 new medical personnel and contracted with Maxor National Pharmacy Services Corp. for the pharmacy update - and this is only the beginning.

"The creation of a constitutional medical care system is within reach, but it will take time to get there," Sillen said in a news release Wednesday.

In the next three years, Sillen plans to build 10,000 hospital beds, create a statewide wireless network, expand the pharmacy system and implement a number of specialized training programs for conditions like asthma. The state will be made to pay for whatever he requires, according to Kagan, who added that there are no total-cost projections for the improvements.

Maxor won the bid for the three-year pharmacy contract at \$5 million a year. Their software will create a new tracking system for prescriptions in the prisons, rearrange work flow and standardize the list of approved drugs, Kagan said.

"The pharmacy pilot is one of our top priorities," Kagan said. "(We've seen) medical error, wasted money and materials, misplaced prescriptions, wrong prescriptions. Pharmacy is a huge issue."

In a letter dated Sept. 19, Sullen wrote that "virtually every aspect of the (prison health care) system was broken (as of 2002)."

"For years after," he wrote, "court experts continued to provide compelling evidence of the degraded conditions, patient suffering and death and state intransigence that blocked necessary reform."

It all amounts to what Sullen calls "an emergency." But you wouldn't know it from talking to health care officials at Mule Creek. While other prisons have reported lacking such basics as gauze and sutures, Mule Creek officials said they have that and more, including services for optometry, pediatry, orthotics, orthopedics, pain management, and MRI and CT scans.

"We're lucky in that we have clinicians that want to come work here because of our location," said Terri Weinholdt, Mule Creek health care administrator. "We have a nice setup. Inmates are seen frequently."

In regard to the pilot pharmacy program, Weinholdt said, "It's streamlined the process."

Weinholdt declined to comment on whether or not Mule Creek faces any specific needs. Last week, an inmate had to be transported to a public hospital for a possible broken shoulder he incurred during a riot. Weinholdt did not say whether such an injury would be treatable on prison grounds in the future.

"We definitely need more space," she said.

Currently, the pharmacy at the prison is staffed by 17 members, according to Chris Weathersbee, public

information officer. An average of 839 pills is delivered daily, he said, for problems that range from mental health disorders to the common cold.

Mule Creek's apparent lack of deficiencies is part of the reason they were chosen for the pharmacy pilot, according to Kagan. She said Sullen was "very impressed" with staff during a July visit and praised them for their camaraderie, open communication and "commitment to improvement." Weathersbee said the pharmacy received an award from Maxor for being "fiscally responsible and efficient."

The pharmacy pilot recently began at Folsom State Prison and is scheduled to start at the California Men's Colony in November and the California Institution for Women in January. Other pilots underway include an inmate medical appeals program at California State Prison in Sacramento and a "specialty care" pilot at the California Correctional Institution.

According to Wednesday's release, there is still a 21 percent vacancy rate in medical positions at state prisons. There are currently 175,000 inmates being held in California's 33 adult prisons.