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**Section:** News

## **Medical care gains at prisons**

*Robin Miller/City Editor*

Saying there is still much work to be done, court-appointed receiver Robert Sillen said Wednesday he is making some progress in overhauling the state's prison medical care system. Sillen laid out a detailed account of the current system-wide initiatives as well as several pilot projects at individual prisons undertaken to bring prison medical care up to constitutional standards in a report to U.S. District Court Judge Thelton E. Henderson.

Included in his report are details about efforts to change operations at Vacaville's two prisons. The receivership is the result of a 2001 class action that found the medical care in California's adult prisons violates the Eighth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, which forbids cruel and unusual punishment. Henderson last year appointed Sillen as receiver to oversee operations and direct improvement in the quality of medical care, stripping that function from the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation.

In his latest report, Sillen said his approach has a dual focus on health-care providers and medical system issues, both of which contribute to needless patient deaths. In an analysis of California inmate deaths in 2006, released last week, Sillen said 66 of the deaths (15 percent) either were preventable (18 of them) or possibly preventable (48 of them).

"This is all about unnecessary human suffering," Sillen said. "It's not just about data. It's an emergency." While sounding a positive note on some of the efforts made to date, Sillen warned there is still much work to be completed.

"We have made significant progress in many areas, and yet, the surface has hardly been scratched," he said. "There are deep-rooted reasons why the system is as broken as it is. We have identified these over the last year and have begun working to untangle them. The bottom line is that there are no clinical or business systems in place that support good care. That's why it was taken over from the state." Sillen said his team has taken several steps to address the crisis. Top among them is the recruitment of qualified, permanent doctors, nurses, pharmacists and other medical and support staff. CDCR human resources staff who now report to the receiver have hired nearly 500 people since June, reducing the overall vacancy rate for CDCR medical and staff who support medical positions from 31 percent to 21 percent. The new hires include registered nurses, licensed vocational nurses, physicians, nurse practitioners, physician assistants, certified nursing assistants, health record technicians and supervisors, pharmacy technicians, pharmacists, health program advisors and specialists, lab assistants, clinic lab and radiology technologists, public health nurses, nurse instructors and supervising nurses.

These professionals cannot perform well, however, if they do not have accurate patient information, an appropriate place to work or a system where tests and consults are performed in a timely manner, Sillen said, noting that his team is working to address deficiencies.

"We can't expect clinicians to make good decisions if they don't have lab results, medical records, a pharmacy that delivers their prescriptions and a culture that says these inmate patients are human beings," Sillen said. "We have a Plan of Action that addresses these challenges in turn. The creation of a constitutional medical care system is within reach, but it will take time to get there."

Among his priorities for the next three years, Sillen said, is to build up to 5,000 medical and 5,000 mental health beds statewide; to construct necessary clinical and support space in existing prisons; to pilot a nursing orientation and preceptor program for new hires; to launch an asthma initiative to provide clinical protocols, case management and training to improve the care given to inmates with asthma; and, to establish a statewide wireless network that would connect all prisons to each other.

Sillen also outlined changes already made or planned for all 33 prisons, including both California Medical Facility and California State Prison, Solano, in Vacaville.

CMF, he said will be the next prison to implement a Health Care Access Unit program, like one currently being implemented at San Quentin. The program assigns correctional officers to medical escort and transport duties, improving access to care.

In addition, Sillen said his team will continue the pharmacy system turnaround in the state prison system with the help of Maxor National Pharmacy Service Corp. Pilot programs are already in place at two prisons and Maxor is providing operational help at both CMF and CSP, Solano, Sillen said. Robin Miller can be reached at [citydesk@thereporter.com](mailto:citydesk@thereporter.com).

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