

# Medical parole bill deserves approval

Editorial  
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A sensible bill sits on the governor's desk that would reduce prison medical costs and eliminate the need to provide expensive 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week security for dying and totally incapacitated inmates. The governor should sign it.

Senate Bill 1399 by Sen. Mark Leno, D-San Francisco, would grant medical parole to inmates who are permanently medically incapacitated and unable to perform the basic activities of daily life. These are imprisoned felons who cannot walk, eat or even use the toilet themselves and who pose no threat to public safety.

The bill specifically targets inmates who are in vegetative states or have six months or less to live. Current law provides that these inmates must be guarded around the clock. The costs are staggering. For example, in 2008, one inmate in a persistent vegetative state cost California taxpayers more than \$800,000. Half of that money went for his medical care, the other half for double guarding him as he lay immobile in his hospital bed.

The Leno bill would allow that prisoner to be released to a community facility where half of the cost of his medical care would be borne by the federal government under Medi-Cal. Around the clock security for comatose inmates could be eliminated, as well as the cost of transporting terminally ill inmates.

The federal prison health care receiver says 32 inmates would be immediately eligible for medical parole under the Leno bill. Their release would save the state \$30 million in the first year the Leno bill went into effect.

The bill cannot be dismissed as soft on crime. It does not allow for the release of inmates who are on death row or who are serving life sentences without the possibility of parole. In the unlikely event an inmate release on medical parole recovers, he can be sent back to prison.

As Leno has asked: Does it make sense for the state to pay two correctional officers to guard an inmate 24 hours a day as the inmate lies comatose or in a permanent vegetative state? Does it make sense for state prisons to become long-term care facilities for prisoners with end-stage Alzheimer's disease or with dementia so severe they no longer know they are in prison?

Caring for and guarding severely incapacitated felons costs the state tens of millions of dollars a year, money California cannot afford to waste.

The governor should sign SB 1399.