

# Families United for Prison Reform

By Marichal J. Brown

Signature collectors have hit the streets in California to qualify the Sentencing and Parole Reform Statute for the November 2008 General Election. There are two prison reform measures that would eradicate the status-quo of today's laws.

The first initiative, the Sentencing and Parole Reform Statute would rescind the "Three Strikes" law that voters passed in 1993, which gives repeat offenders a 25 years-to-life sentence. The second measure is the Prisoner Rights Statute, this would make overnight family visits a right for all prisoners and give them the right to correspond and or meet confidentially with the news media.

To qualify for the November 2008 ballot there is a requirement of 434,000 eligible registered voters' signatures for each Statute by February 25.

The initiatives are sponsored by Families United for Prison Reform (a non-profit organization). The Sentencing and Parole Reform Statute will continue the trend established by the U.S. District Courts to put a cap on the overcrowding of the California prisons.

Annie Smith, Executive Director and spokesperson for Families United for Prison Reform, explains that the Sentencing and Parole Reform proposal is two-fold. "It would provide financial relief for California taxpayers who are paying an incredible amount of money for the prison system and invest that money back into rehabilitation of prisoners that belong there. And number 2, it would repeal the 'Three Strikes' law."

Nathan Barankin, a communications director for State Attorney General Bill Lockyer stated in a San Francisco Chronicle, "Most three-strike convictions are for nonviolent offenses, and there's plenty of room for legitimate debate about whether the net in California is too wide."

The law was designed for serious or violent felonies, which include crimes of robbery, rape, child molest, murder, assault with a firearm, residential burglary, kidnapping, arson and other similar offenses.

But when petty theft is the case, is it really necessary for 25 years-to-life sentencing.

Gregory Taylor was arrested in 1997 and faced 25 years to life after being caught trying to pry open a screen over the kitchen door of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Los Angeles, CA. He said he was trying to get something to eat.

Leandro Andrade was sentenced to 50 years to life for two felony petty theft convictions, having stolen several videotapes from two Kmart stores on two separate occasions; each theft qualified as a third strike.

Jerry Dewayne Williams was given 25 years to life in prison for stealing a slice of pepperoni pizza.

"There are many studies that show that the 'Three Strikes' law doesn't work. In these studies they found that the 'Three Strikes' law is given more often to people of color and that the crime rate in counties that use the 'Three Strikes' law haven't changed," Smith said. "And it is most important to actually allow prisoners to be able to have parole."

Even California police have reported that since the "Three Strikes" laws went into effect suspects have become more violent in resisting arrest.

"By enacting straightforward sentencing and parole guidelines, this initiative will save California taxpayers in the low billions of dollars and will eliminate the need to build new prisons or to send California prisoners out of state to serve their sentences," said Smith.

There is a 1 degree separation of people that have family or friends in prison, so everyone in California has been affected by the 'Three-Strike' law. Residents of California have the right to say where their hard earned tax dollars goes. The choices are simple, either spend \$20 thousand a year to educate the youth or \$50 thousand a year to house them in prison.

Ex-felons can register to vote as long as they are no longer incarcerated, on probation or parole. People are also allowed to vote if they are in the county jail awaiting trial or not convicted of a felony.

To help get signatures for the Prison Reform Statutes, go to the website [www.californiaprisonreform.org](http://www.californiaprisonreform.org), click on the 'Get Signatures' link and download the forms, follow the instruction and fill out the information.

For more information contact Families United for Prison Reform at 951.271.9546 x102 or email them at [info@californiaprisonreform.org](mailto:info@californiaprisonreform.org).