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Signatures being collected for two crime-related initiatives

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Two new initiative drives have started to collect petition signatures for measures the initiatives' backer would like on the state ballot.

The two initiatives are titled "Increase In Prisoner Rights" and "Sentencing and Parole Reform."

Ann Smith, proponent of the measures, must collect the signatures of 433,971 registered voters — the number equal to 5 percent of the total votes cast for governor in the 2006 gubernatorial election — for each measure in order to qualify it for the ballot. She has until Feb. 25 to collect the signatures, according to a California Secretary of State's Office's news release.

The first proposed measure would amend the California Penal Code to provide additional rights to adult prisoners, the news release stated. The Secretary of State's Office's tracking number for this measure is 1272 and the Attorney General's Office's tracking number is 07-0040.

This measure would require that prisoners have a right to: 1) confidential meetings and correspondence with media; 2) a minimum of 56 hours per week visitation; 3) a minimum time period for recreation and entertainment; 4) contact and family overnight visitation for inmates not housed in segregation, security or intake; 5) specified minimum access to personal property, canteen goods and entertainment appliances; 6) specified minimum telephone access; and 7) access to movies rated PG-13, R and NC-17.

The measure would eliminate prison authorities' discretion to prohibit access to material deemed obscene.

The summary of estimate made by the Legislative Analyst's Office and the director of finance of fiscal impact on state and local government said this measure would increase prison operating costs by several tens of millions of dollars annually primarily to increase inmate access to visiting. The state also said taxpayers would incur one-time capital outlay costs of up to a couple tens of millions of dollars to construct and renovate prison visiting facilities.

The second proposed measure would repeal California's "three-strikes" sentencing statutes by reducing sentences and providing earlier parole eligibility for habitual offenders.

It would provide for resentencing of offenders, except persons convicted of murder, to conform with new sentencing limits, the news release stated.

The state said the measure would provide persons sentenced to life with possibility of parole — including those previously sentenced — the ability to become parole eligible after seven years. The state also said it would require persons sentenced to life with the possibility of parole to be released within specified time frames.

And it would require recalculations of parole eligibility dates, resetting of parole release dates and limits factors that may be considered in setting parole release dates, the news release stated.

There would also be an increase of work-time credits, the news release stated.

The Legislative Analyst's Office and the state finance director said there would be a net state operating savings of potentially a few hundred million dollars initially, increasing to the low billions of dollars annually, primarily due to reduced prison operating costs.

They also both said there would be unknown one-time state savings for capital outlay associated with prison construction that would otherwise be needed, potentially as much as several billions of dollars in the long term.

And, they said, it would also increase county costs potentially in the low hundreds of millions of dollars annually for jail

and court-related costs.

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