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EDITORIALS/LETTERS

A Simple Way to Fight H.I.V. and AIDS

In any given year, perhaps a third of the people infected with hepatitis C and more than 15 percent of those with AIDS spend time behind bars. With infection levels far higher than in the outside world, the jails and prisons are a potential public health menace. Officials have a special duty to curb the spread of disease among the more than 11 million people who pass through the system each year.

No one knows for sure how many people pick up H.I.V. while incarcerated. But a 2002 survey of prisoners' own estimates found that about 44 percent of the inmates were probably participating in sex acts. Researchers suspect that about 70 percent had their first same-sex experiences in prison. If those estimates are anywhere near accurate, the risk of infection behind bars is substantial, and the men who contract H.I.V. in prison return home to infect wives and girlfriends. Still, condoms are barred or unavailable in 95 percent of the country's prisons.

The national picture could well change if the California Legislature passes a timely bill, introduced by Paul Koretz, a Democrat from West Hollywood, that would require California's corrections system, the nation's largest, to allow public health and nonprofit groups to distribute condoms. In documents filed in support of the bill, Mr. Koretz notes that prevention programs make financial sense, too, given that treating an H.I.V.-positive person outside prison costs California nearly \$23,000 a year.

Distributing condoms does not encourage sex in prison — that appears to be going on anyway. And data from Canada and American jurisdictions found no evidence that sexual activity goes up or that security declines once prisoners have access to condoms. On the contrary, jurisdictions that adopt such programs tend to keep and build upon them. Corrections officers usually support the programs once they have been proved to be effective.