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## Fighting AIDS Behind Bars

The United States will never contain deadly diseases like AIDS and hepatitis C until it prevents them from spreading behind bars, where infection levels are many times as high as in the world outside and the diseases spread easily, thanks in part to unprotected sex among inmates. Routine testing and education programs in prison are a must. But so are common-sense programs that distribute condoms behind bars. These programs have long since been standard operating procedure in prison systems abroad, but are unavailable in about 95 percent of this country's prisons.

This situation has persisted despite studies showing that same-sex encounters behind bars are more common than prison officials care to admit, and despite warnings from public health officials, who have pointed out time and again that the highest AIDS rates are typically found in the communities that are the homes of the largest numbers of ex-offenders. But a condom distribution bill recently passed by the California State Assembly could well

be the beginning of a more sensible policy — not just in California, but in the country as a whole.

Pushed through the Assembly by Paul Koretz, a Democrat from West Hollywood, the bill has yet to clear the Senate. If it does, it would require California's corrections system, the nation's largest, to allow public health and nonprofit groups to distribute condoms to inmates. The Assembly wisely rejected the spurious argument that distributing condoms would promote sex in prison — understanding that sex among inmates is common and will continue no matter what lawmakers say.

The Assembly, which is the more conservative of California's two legislative houses, passed the bill thanks to strong support from medical, civil rights and law enforcement organizations, all of which have watched the AIDS epidemic with growing alarm. The bill deserves to be passed by the State Senate and to be widely emulated. After all, the country needs all the tools it can get in the fight against AIDS.

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