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Reality and Denial in California Prisons

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's political courage clearly failed him when he vetoed a bill that would have permitted the distribution of condoms in California's AIDS-ravaged prisons. At the same time, the governor ordered up a pilot distribution program for one as-yet unnamed prison. A small, exploratory program falls far short of the mass distribution effort that the system clearly needs.

Public health officials around the world have long realized that condom distribution is central to any meaningful AIDS-prevention effort. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention made that point last year when it urged states to consider starting condom programs in prisons. Programs are already up and running in Canada and much of the European Union, as well as in jails in Los Angeles, San Francisco, Philadelphia, Washington and New York.

Mr. Schwarzenegger said he vetoed the bill because it conflicts with state law that makes sexual contact

among inmates illegal. That's self-defeating and a denial of the reality of life behind bars, and the governor seems to know it. His veto statement acknowledged that condom distribution represents a reasonable "public policy, and it is consistent with the need to improve our prison health care system and overall public health."

The governor should have gone with what he knows and signed this bill. His pilot program needs to get under way quickly and should be expanded as soon as possible. That's the only way to improve California's prison health care system and overall public health.