

North American Association of Wardens and Superintendents (NAAWS)

Position Paper Against Proposition 6: The Case for Inmate Labor in California

Introduction

Proposition 6, a proposed amendment to California law, seeks to make inmate labor voluntary, fundamentally altering a system that has long been used as a tool for rehabilitation, skill-building, and maintaining institutional order. While the intention behind this proposal may be to protect the rights and dignity of incarcerated individuals, the long-term consequences of eliminating mandatory inmate labor would likely do more harm than good. This paper argues against Proposition 6 by focusing on the critical benefits that inmate labor provides in terms of rehabilitation, work ethic development, skill acquisition, and institutional stability.

1. Inmate Labor as a Tool for Rehabilitation

Incarceration, by its very nature, imposes restrictions on the autonomy and activities of those imprisoned. Inmate labor programs provide structured, meaningful activities that can lead to personal growth and rehabilitation. Engaging in work while incarcerated helps individuals acquire practical skills that are essential for reintegration into society upon release. Many inmates enter prison with limited job experience or education, and labor programs give them an opportunity to learn valuable skills in industries such as agriculture, manufacturing, maintenance, and more.

Studies have consistently shown that inmates who participate in work programs while incarcerated are more likely to find employment upon release. By making labor voluntary, Proposition 6 would reduce opportunities for inmates to gain these skills, potentially leaving them ill-prepared to compete in the job market. If inmates are released without practical job skills or a sense of work discipline, they are more likely to re-offend, contributing to higher recidivism rates. Thus, mandatory labor is a powerful tool to promote rehabilitation and successful reentry into society.

2. Promoting a Strong Work Ethic and Responsibility

Inmate labor teaches responsibility, time management, and the importance of contributing to a community. Many inmates come from backgrounds where these values were never instilled. By requiring them to participate in labor programs, prisons can help inmates develop the habits necessary for success after release. Inmates learn the value of showing up to work, completing tasks, and working collaboratively with others—all essential components of functioning in the broader society.

Allowing inmates to opt out of labor would risk creating a system where they are idle for long periods. Extended idleness in a prison setting can lead to negative behavior, including increased violence, drug use, and the formation of gangs. Structured work opportunities keep inmates busy, reducing the likelihood of disciplinary problems and helping maintain order within the institution.

3. Keeping Inmates Occupied and Out of Trouble

Prison labor programs serve as an effective means of managing inmate behavior. Institutions that offer consistent and productive work experience generally experience fewer disciplinary issues. When inmates have meaningful work to focus on, they are less likely to become involved in trouble within the prison population.

Idle time is often cited as one of the greatest threats to the safety and security of prisons. Without activities to keep them occupied, inmates may become more susceptible to negative influences, including gangs or illegal activities, which pose a danger not only to staff but to other inmates as well. The presence of a mandatory labor system keeps inmates engaged and productive, reducing the potential for conflict and contraband use within the prison.

4. Preparing Inmates for Reentry

Reintegration into society is one of the biggest challenges facing formerly incarcerated individuals. Prison labor programs are designed not just to keep inmates occupied, but to provide them with job-ready skills that can help them secure employment after their release. Inmates who have participated in work programs often leave prison with certifications or job experience that can be transferred to real-world employment opportunities.

For example, programs that train inmates in industries such as welding, carpentry, or agriculture provide them with valuable skills that are in demand in the job market. Without the opportunity to develop these skills through mandatory work programs, inmates could find themselves at a significant disadvantage upon release, increasing their risk of recidivism. In this sense, Proposition 6 would unintentionally undermine one of the key pathways for successful reentry into society.

5. Supporting the Functionality of Prisons and Reducing Costs

Inmate labor also plays an important role in supporting the day-to-day functionality of correctional institutions. Many inmates participate in essential tasks such as facility maintenance, kitchen work, laundry services, and groundskeeping. By making these tasks voluntary, Proposition 6 could lead to significant operational challenges within prisons. If inmates are not required to perform these necessary tasks, correctional facilities may be forced to hire outside labor at a higher cost, placing an additional financial burden on taxpayers.

Inmate labor also contributes to cost-saving measures through partnerships with industries and businesses that use prison labor. These partnerships provide a source of revenue for the state while giving inmates the opportunity to earn wages, save money, and sometimes even support their families. The loss of these labor arrangements could result in financial strain on the state's correctional system, further complicating already tight budgets.

Conclusion

While the intentions behind Proposition 6 may be rooted in fairness and human rights, the unintended consequences of making inmate labor voluntary would likely result in increased idleness, fewer opportunities for skill development, and higher recidivism rates. Inmate labor programs are not just about work; they are about rehabilitation, education, and preparing individuals for life beyond prison walls. These programs foster a strong work ethic, teach responsibility, and provide inmates with the tools they need to become productive members of society upon release.

By keeping inmate labor mandatory, California's prison system can continue to provide incarcerated individuals with the structure, discipline, and skills they need to rebuild their lives, while maintaining institutional stability and reducing costs. For these reasons, we strongly oppose Proposition 6 and urge voters to consider the long-term benefits of inmate labor for both the inmates and society as a whole.