

Solitary Watch

Criminal Justice Issues and Prisoners' Rights

<https://solitarywatch.org/2010/09/20/cash-strapped-california-to-spend-500-million-for-new-condemned-housing-complex-death-row/>

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by [Jean Casella and James Ridgeway](#) | September 20, 2010

With what the [Sacramento Bee](#) called a twisted sense of timing, California Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger announced in mid-August that he plans to borrow \$64.7 million from the state's general fund to move forward with construction of a new death row at San Quentin State Prison. According to a *Bee* editorial, the administration's call for bids to build new digs for condemned inmates comes as the governor's lawyers seek court approval to furlough state workers and cut their pay to minimum wage, and as he pushes to end safety net services for some of California's poorest and most vulnerable citizens.

What's more, the \$64.7 million is merely a down payment. Construction would cost about \$360 million, an amount California lawmakers approved when they authorized a new death row in 2003. Interest payments on 20-year bonds the state ordinarily would sell to finance the construction could add another \$150 million or more to the final price tag, bringing it to more than \$500 million.

A [Correctional News](#) report on the construction bidding process, which moved forward in late August despite opposition, described the new death row as a state-of-the-art 540,000-square-foot condemned inmate complex with 768 cells, occupying a 40-acre site on the grounds of the state's oldest prison, which sits on a piece of prime bayfront real estate in Marin County.

The existing death row is by all accounts [deteriorating and extremely overcrowded](#) in large part because California persists in doling out capital sentences, even though it rarely executes anyone. Judicial rulings have effectively halted executions since 2006. And even before then, according to the *Sacramento Bee*, since capital punishment was reinstated in California in 1978, 13 men have been put to death at San Quentin. Another 73 others have died of suicide, drug overdose and natural causes. The longest-serving inmate has been on death row for 32 years, and the oldest turned 80 this year. In the last month alone, one death row inmate, age 71, died of natural causes, and another, age 70, hanged himself in his cell (shortly after a judge had [commuted his sentence](#) to life without parole).

California currently has more than 700 prisoners on death row, dwarfing the condemned populations of all other states. What the state of California is effectively building, at the cost of \$500,000, is the largest and most expensive long-term solitary confinement facility in the world, where prisoners will live out their lives in locked-down isolation with a death sentence hanging over their heads. In other words, California taxpayers are funding a half-billion-dollar torture ward.

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James Ridgeway (1936-2021) was the founder and co-director of Solitary Watch. An investigative journalist for over 60 years, he served as Washington Correspondent for the *Village Voice* and *Mother Jones*, reporting domestically on subjects ranging from electoral politics to corporate malfeasance to the rise of the racist far-right, and abroad from Central America, Northern Ireland, Eastern Europe, Haiti, and the former Yugoslavia. Earlier, he wrote for *The New Republic* and *Ramparts*, and his work appeared in dozens of other publications. He was the co-director of two films and author of 20 books, including a forthcoming posthumous edition of his groundbreaking 1991 work on the far right, *Blood in the Face*. Jean Casella is the director of Solitary Watch. She has also published work in *The Guardian*, *The Nation*, and *Mother Jones*, and is co-editor of the book *Hell Is a Very Small Place: Voices from Solitary Confinement*. She has received a Soros Justice Media Fellowship and an Alicia Patterson Fellowship. She tweets @solitarywatch.

Accurate information and authentic storytelling can serve as powerful antidotes to ignorance and injustice. We have helped generate public awareness, mainstream media attention, and informed policymaking on what was once an invisible domestic human rights crisis.

Only with your support can we continue this groundbreaking work, shining light into the darkest corners of the U.S. criminal punishment system.

by [Juan Moreno Haines](#)

October 25, 2022

by [Solitary Watch Guest Author](#)

October 13, 2022

by [Vaidya Gullapalli](#)

September 29, 2022

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why not use that money for DNA testing first?? i cant imagine that a separate institution is needed

Where are the Spritual Advocates identifying those who are Wounded Warriors Incarcerated with untreated combat PTSD/Traumatic Brain Injury/Survivors Guilt/etc?
The War Widows

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