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## Critics say new California parole policy is costly, dangerous

[sstanton@sacbee.com](mailto:sstanton@sacbee.com)

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On a Wednesday morning last month, Nicole Clements walked into her Sacramento parole agent's office about 9:40 and signed a one-page document.

The "Notification of Non-Revocable Parole Requirements" spelled out the rules for the 37-year-old Clements, who had been on parole for identity theft and has a history of arrests or citations for drug, theft and other crimes.

"You do not have a parole agent," the document states. "You do not have a requirement to report to a parole office."

"If special and general conditions of parole have been previously imposed upon you, they are no longer in effect," the document states.

In short, Clements could do anything and not be sent back to prison on a parole violation.

Five hours later, she was in a Fair Oaks check cashing office trying to pass a counterfeit MoneyGram for \$932, authorities say.

Before Jan. 25, handling the alleged offense would have been a fairly simple procedure.

"On a normal case, I would call her parole officer, let her know what she did, and she would go to a parole hearing and get anywhere from six months to a year prison, and we wouldn't have to go through the rest of the court system," said Chris Bowman, a retired Sacramento police detective who investigated the case as an on-call investigator for the Sacramento Valley Hi-Tech Crimes Task Force.

Instead, because of the state's new policies on parole, sheriff's officials had to file new charges, send the case to the District Attorney's Office for prosecution and start the legal process all over.

It is one of the problems that law enforcement and crime victims groups cite with the new parole policies, which are being blamed for early release of county jail inmates and other releases of potentially violent prison inmates without supervision.

Even Clements, who claims she is the victim of a misunderstanding, says she doesn't like how the parole system now works.

"I'm being singled out," she said. "I'm a ... victim because of my past."

At the heart of the controversy is a law passed last year that took effect Jan. 25 and was supposed to improve the state's parole system.

The idea was to shift resources away from nonviolent, low-level offenders thought to be less likely to re-offend, or at least less likely to commit serious or violent new crimes.

By removing them from supervision of parole agents, the agents would have more time to supervise the violent and serious offenders who have won release, the thinking went.

"The lower-level offender that we have targeted for (non-revocable parole) gets no value out of parole supervision," said corrections spokesman Oscar Hidalgo. "The old system wasn't working; placing everyone on parole supervision was not working. Everyone agrees with that."

Each month, 10,000 inmates leave state prisons, Hidalgo added, and corrections officials have to dedicate their resources toward watching those most likely to commit new serious crimes.

"These people are coming out whether they're on parole or not," he said. "They're still coming out to our communities and we have to focus, really, with our limited resources, on those we think are our highest risks in the community."

But from Day One, the law has come under attack from crime victims' groups, law enforcement and others through news conferences, lawsuits and protests.

Last week, Assemblyman Ted Lieu, D-Torrance, renewed his attack on the parole policies, releasing data that indicate that inmates convicted of serious and violent crimes are being released, despite assurances to the contrary.

"Some of those crimes are shocking," Lieu said.

They include 10 inmates convicted of possession of deadly or illegal weapons, 50 imprisoned for being drug addicts possessing a firearm, six for illegal possession of an assault weapon and one for solicitation of murder.

Corrections officials say that every inmate who has been released on non-revocable parole has had his or her file reviewed, any gang affiliations studied and been subjected to a rigorous risk assessment.

Under the reform effort, prison officials plan to review files for 25,000 inmates, a process expected to last through May; already more than 12,000 have gone through the review, officials say.

Of those, 5,801 have been released on non-revocable parole, and nearly 4,391 have been judged not eligible to be released without supervision.

But Lieu questions how closely such inmates are being checked, and how so many could have gone through reviews less than three months after the law took effect.

"One of the reasons I voted against this bill last year is the whole concept of non-revocable parole makes no sense," said Lieu, who is running for state attorney general. "There is no reason to say that even if a person commits a new crime, we're going to have a policy that says we can't revoke their parole.

"There is no public safety reason for that. It winds up costing us more in the long run, because to have a parolee sent back to prison you have to re-prosecute."

That is the situation authorities now face with Clements, who is charged with three felony counts over the counterfeit MoneyGram.

Clements told investigators she got the MoneyGrams from an Internet company and thought she was operating for them as a "mystery shopper" and only later realized she had been taken in by a scam, court documents state.

But Sacramento sheriff's Capt. Jim Cooper, who commands the task force that investigated the case, said his unit has been inundated with identity theft and related crimes, and the new parole policies add to the workload to prosecute them.

"The taxpayers of Sacramento County have to go through arraignment, preliminary hearing and, quite possibly, a trial before she is held to answer," Cooper said. "In the past, parole violations would have saved

the taxpayers a significant amount of money in court time, with the DA, the public defender and also law enforcement."

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*Call The Bee's Sam Stanton, (916) 321-1091.*