



CALIFORNIA NEWS PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION CNPA Services, Inc.

2701 K Street, Sacramento, CA 95816 ♦ Ph: 916.288.6000 ♦ Fax: 916.288.6002 ♦ www.cnpa.com



RTDNA



February 27, 2023

Honorable Nancy Skinner
1021 O Street, Suite 8630
Sacramento, CA 95814

RE: Support SB 254 (Skinner)

Dear Senator Skinner,

I submit this letter on behalf of the California News Publishers Association (CNPA), a proud co-sponsor your SB 254, and a broad coalition of press groups and open-government organizations, including: Californians Aware, First Amendment Coalition, California Black Media, Ethnic Media Services, The Freedom of Information Committee of the Society of Professional Journalists, Northern California chapter, Radio Television Digital News Association, Society of Professional Journalists, Los Angeles, Society of Professional Journalists, San Diego Pro Chapter, National Press Photographers Association, CCNMA: Latino Journalists of California, National Association of Black Journalists Los Angeles, Orange County Press Club, and National Writers Union, that support increased access to our state’s prisons and local jails.

Restoring Media Access to California’s Prisons and Jails is Critical to Inform the Public and the Legislature

California prisons currently are among the least transparent in the nation. But prior to the 1990s, state prisons were much more accessible to the news media, enabling the public and policymakers to know more about conditions for those incarcerated and working in jails and prisons.

In the absence of effective and impartial outside scrutiny, the public is left to rely only on limited information that law enforcement is willing to release and what any individual incarcerated person or corrections employees relay. Ensuring members of the press have a meaningful process to tour

facilities and conduct in-person interviews is a way to help give the public a more complete picture of issues affecting incarcerated people and workers alike.

In addition to ensuring meaningful access for members of the press, SB 254 will open access for legislators and other state officials, allowing them to provide policymakers with the information they need for effective oversight. This will help California's elected and appointed leaders more fully understand the impact and effectiveness of the many decisions and changes from within California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR).

We appreciate your [office's research showing](#) that California is more secretive than other states, including Maine, Florida, and Rhode Island. California should be a leader in transparency and accountability of its corrections systems.

Restoring Access Will Create More Complete Picture of What Occurs Inside California's Jails and Prisons

Journalists require access to those who are incarcerated to properly investigate newsworthy events and tell more complete stories. For over 20 years, CDCR allowed journalists to conduct face-to-face interviews. The publication of the resulting stories helped inform the public and initiate important policy changes necessary to achieve the efficient administration of the prison system and to provide accountability for one of California's largest and most expensive public institutions. CNPA is not aware of a single incident in which a journalist's interview or use of confidential correspondence with an incarcerated person posed a threat to the security of any of California's prisons.

In addition to ensuring meaningful access to state prisons, the bill covers city and county jails. Local jails are a critically important part of the criminal legal system, and the public deserves to have a more complete pictures of operations and conditions of these facilities. Importantly, the bill also directly prohibits any retaliation toward incarcerated people who speak to the media, which further increases transparency by creating conditions that help journalists do their important work of informing their communities.

Opponents of this bill may argue that interviews with incarcerated people only serve to publicize crimes or make celebrities of people serving time for serious crimes. But the public has shown, through protests and action across the country, that they demand more insight into our criminal legal system, not less. Such concerns over results of news coverage they may not like should not trump the public's right to information. Access is about accountability and a more complete story. Notably, many journalistic interviews are conducted to obtain information and to inform the public about the policies and procedures of the CDCR or local jails, which the public deserves to know about.

Passage of SB 254 would accomplish twin aims bringing more transparency to one of the most crucial parts of California's criminal legal system and aiding advocates and policymakers in considering possible reforms. The free flow of information is an invaluable component — and precursor — of any effective reforms.

For all reasons, CNPA and this coalition of organizations applauds your leadership in attempting to restore a policy that served California's taxpayers and the Legislature well. CNPA looks forward to

working with you and our co-sponsor, the California Broadcasters Association, to obtain the governor's signature on this bill.

Sincerely,



Brittney Barsotti
General Counsel, CNPA

Joined by:

Californians Aware

California Black Media

Ethnic Media Services

First Amendment Coalition

The Freedom of Information Committee of the Society of Professional Journalists, Northern California chapter

Radio Television Digital News Association

Society of Professional Journalists, Los Angeles

Society of Professional Journalists, San Diego Pro Chapter

National Press Photographers Association

CCNMA: Latino Journalists of California

National Writers Union

Orange County Press Club