

Money politics delaying needed prison reform

By Sonny Ganaden and Lorenn Walker

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Hawaii spends millions contracting with the for-profit prison company Corrections Corporation of America (CCA).

Unlike other states, Hawaii plans to spend more, while neglecting imprisonment reduction and ignoring corporate prison problems.

Money politics is having perverse effects on Hawaii's prison system.

In 1994, prisons here suffered from disrepair and could not house a growing population. It contracted with corporate prisons by sending 300 people to the mainland. Today, roughly 1,400 of Hawaii's approximately 6,000 prisoners are in a CCA Arizona prison.

Disregarding its own reports about corporate prison problems, state contracts with CCA have nearly quadrupled while state prisons continue to decay. The state Department of Public Safety says it spends about \$44 million annually contracting with CCA, but the state auditor and others believe the amount is higher, considering other costs.

As Hawaii prepares to rebuild its prisons, the state seeks public-private partnerships. Since 2013, CCA has spent over \$230,000 employing at least 10 Hawaii lobbyists, mostly lawyers. Their efforts have paid off. Legislation passed for new prison construction and public-private partnerships.



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Prison building partnerships with corporations will further entrench known problems. Federal and state reports from across the country have found profit prisons do not save money or make communities safer. Minnesota, California, Idaho, Texas and Kentucky have divested wholly or partly from profit-prison contracting.

CCA's extensive lobbying in Hawaii raises questions of its influence on prison reform. It is in the interest of for-profit prisons to maintain high incarceration rates.

Despite its own agencies' warnings, the state is working with CCA to expand their relationship.

In 2010, Hawaii's auditor found the state's CCA contract had serious problems, including "no plan for contracting for private prison beds to reasonably ensure fiscal responsibility in obtaining the best value at prices the state can afford."

A 2011 Hawaii attorney general report, discussing private prisons, criticized the state's "shortsightedness of relying on a perspective that stresses short-term savings at the expense of policies and programs aimed at improving the prospects for offenders' rehabilitation and the satisfaction of their basic needs and rights."

Out-of-state imprisonment worsens the well-documented disproportionate impact of imprisonment on Hawaiians. Hawaii's Legislature commissioned the Native Hawaiian Justice Task Force, which recommended in 2013: "[P]risoners held out of state should be returned. The state should make the return of inmates a top priority, and inmates should be returned as soon as practicable, consistent with public safety."

Further, "Once the inmates are returned from private out-of-state facilities, the state should consider passing legislation prohibiting future use of private, for-profit, correctional facilities."

These recommendations have been ignored.

Gov. David Ige recently said 248 incarcerated people at Halawa prison must be imprisoned with CCA in Arizona while Halawa is renovated. Meanwhile, at the Honolulu federal prison, where about 200 beds are rented for state prisoners, hundreds of more beds remain empty. The state's plan to send more people to Arizona, instead of working on renting local beds, goes against policy recommendations, but favors CCA.

These decisions are matters of life and death. Recently, four imprisoned people were killed in a CCA Oklahoma prison, and in August, 21-year-old Johnathan Namauleg from Maui died in his CCA Arizona cell.

The state's proposed private prison expansion is not based on best practices for community safety, victim healing or offender rehabilitation. Instead, it is based on the influence of corporate prisons and their lobbyists.

Hawaii must reduce its imprisoned population and renovate its prisons, but partnering with for-profit prisons reflects corporate influence, ignores the state's own concerns, and entrenches public-private relationships that work against needed reform, improved public safety, and the common good.

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