

State must support programs to cut recidivism

By Lorenn Walker

Building a new prison is the same bad answer to crime that has not worked for the past 30 years, except to support a massive corrections industry that now, sadly, imprisons one out of every 100 Americans. Hawai'i now spends more than \$150 million a year on corrections.

Our dismal recidivism rate, with about 50 percent of all people our state incarcerates returning to prison only two years later, is evidence prison doesn't prevent criminal behavior.

Most people who commit crimes naturally desist from it eventually. Today it is acknowledged by criminal justice researchers that most people simply quit committing crimes regardless of prison. This phenomenon is known as desistance. Knowledgeable corrections experts also know that the most important factor that influences desistance from crime is having relationships with law-abiding people.

Instead of building a new prison, the state should be supporting programs that support desistance and assist incarcerated people in developing relationships with positive people.

The Hawai'i Community Safety Act of 2007 provides for a Comprehensive Offender Re-entry System and was passed over Gov. Linda Lingle's veto. This law mandates many positive provisions including a statewide pilot of Restorative Circles for incarcerated people and their loved ones.

Restorative Circles are based on restorative justice principles, which focus on healing and solution-focused problem solving. Restorative practices bring people together to discuss how they were harmed and what can be done to repair the harm. They allow for emotional expression, which is usually not part of our traditional criminal justice system, yet vital for healing and reconciliation.

Restorative Circles are for people in prison who willingly take responsibility for their behavior and want to meet with their loved ones in a reconciliation effort to make amends and repair relationships. A prison counselor also attends.

Since 2005, 33 circles have been provided under private grants at Waiawa prison and the women's prison. Six articles have been published, five in national publications, about the program.

More than 200 people have been surveyed about their participation in the circles and have indicated they believe the process helps heal and build positive relationships.

While the state prison system has requested that Gov. Linda Lingle release the funds for the Restorative Circle program, the Community Safety Act of 2007 has not been implemented. In the meantime, Hawai'i's Restorative Circle program is getting a lot of international attention beginning with the country of Belgium.

At Queen's University in Belfast, Northern Ireland, Professor Shadd Maruna, author of "Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives," and a desistance expert, says Restorative Circles are "organically occurring community processes of reconciliation" that the criminal justice system must support for effective prisoner re-entry.

The Modified Circle process was developed in response to the inability or unwillingness of some loved ones to attend a regular circle. In these cases, other incarcerated friends participate as supporters.

In the Modified Circles, which are only provided during special training courses at the prisons, the incarcerated person makes a plan for how they can reconcile. This is usually to live a crime- and drug-free life, and often includes writing apology letters and volunteering to do community service. It is empowering for individuals to decide to do these things on their own.

Regardless of the benefits of the Modified Circles, our prison system does not see the value in them and will not allow them outside of the training program.

Finally, the circles have caught the attention of people in New Zealand, where the Maori people have practiced restorative justice for centuries. In 1989, the New Zealand government mandated

that all youth be treated with restorative justice instead of traditional justice processes. As a result, there was a marked drop in juvenile recidivism.

Professor Gabrielle Maxwell, a respected criminologist and author, has studied New Zealand's restorative practices extensively. She is very interested in our circle program and has invited me to present on them there next month.

The bill for a new prison should be defeated. We must stop the cycle of incarceration and furthering our faulty prison system. Prisons risk the community's safety, waste scarce resources and damage people's lives. Instead the state should release the funds to implement the Community Safety Act of 2007, and support further programs, like Modified Circles, that have more promise for addressing crime than prisons, which we clearly know are ineffective.

Lorenn Walker is a Waialua resident and a health educator. She wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.