



OPINION

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Rehabilitation saves lives, money

Reducing recidivism rate can benefit the economy and help convicts heal[Print this page](#) [E-mail this article](#) [Share](#)

By Lorenn Walker

"Never allow a crisis to go to waste. [T]hey are opportunities to do big things," said presidential advisor Rahm Emanuel and seconded by Peter Cunningham of the U.S. Department of Education.

ADVERTISEMENT Our prison system faces a crisis and wastes not only financial but human resources. Our current financial crisis could be used to improve our economy, as well as our community's well being, by working to rehabilitate imprisoned people and heal victims of crime.

Current recidivism data show that people who serve their entire sentence in our state prisons have higher recidivism rates than people on parole or probation. About 60 percent of the people in prison who serve their whole sentence are back in prison or rearrested within three years, while people paroled and on probation have a recidivism rate of about 50 percent.

The recidivism rate for federally supervised probationers is significantly lower than the state's rate. Hawaii's chief federal probation officer, Rich Crawford, says the lower federal rate is probably because federal probation offices receive funding "to support assessment, treatment and rehabilitation" related to substance abuse, mental health, and sex offenses.

Our state prison system should follow the federal example and spend more on rehabilitation. In 2008 the state prisons operated on about \$200 million, spending about \$20 million on programs, yet about \$63 million was paid to a private corporation to keep people incarcerated on the Mainland. Prison funds should be reallocated for rehabilitation, including releasing non-violent offenders into community-based programs in Hawaii.

More than 80 percent of the women and 60 percent of the men incarcerated in state prisons committed non-violent offenses and most abused substances.

Our state court system has better recidivism results than our prisons despite its operating on only 2.6 percent of our entire state budget, while the prison system takes 5 percent and is far less successful at rehabilitating people.

The state courts have piloted carefully researched programs that show we can do better at preventing repeat crime, and at the same time provide healing for crime victims.

The Circuit Court system's problem-solving drug, girls, and mental health courts, as well as the H.O.P.E. program, are reducing recidivism.

H.O.P.E. supervises people convicted of felonies who have been placed on probation. It imposes immediate and graduated sanctions for probation violations, including drug use. Varying lengths of jail sentences for repeated violations have resulted in significantly less drug use and re-offending.

H.O.P.E. received bad publicity concerning two offenders who allegedly committed murder, but even if they are guilty, H.O.P.E. should not be blamed. The alleged offenders represent only two out of approximately 1,500 people in the program.



The Hawai'i prison system could learn from the federal model.

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The state District Court worked with a community-based program to pilot Pono Kaulike for people convicted of misdemeanors and for victims of mostly violent crimes. Typically our system focuses exclusively on convicting and punishing offenders, while Pono Kaulike sought to rehabilitate offenders who pleaded guilty, and heal crime victims.

In Pono Kaulike, crime victims, offenders and their loved ones were invited to participate in restorative processes — meeting together, separately or with loved ones to address what they needed to repair the harm and to reach their goals. The program significantly reduced repeat crime and increased healing. Many times, unless the underlying problem that brought people to the justice system is not addressed, further violence results.

A New York court is replicating the program.

Currently Ala Kuola, a community-based program, is working to provide restorative services for people involved in temporary restraining orders. According to Ed Flores, the program director with 20 years experience helping people in conflict, "The missing piece in the justice system is healing."

Rehabilitation is about healing. Let's take advantage of this economic crisis and change our current prison approach to save scarce public resources and make our community safer.

Lorenn Walker is a public health educator who develops and researches group learning processes. She is also a former state deputy attorney general who represented the state prison system in lawsuits. She wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.

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