

Incarceration system needs overhaul

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We can easily improve our corrections system without more money, and without building a new Maui prison, by redistributing what we already spend in wiser ways.

Hawaii currently spends around \$200 million a year on imprisoning about 6,000 people, about 2,000 of whom are in a private prison in Arizona.

Many, including Gov. Neil Abercrombie, realize it is "dysfunctional" and harmful for rehabilitation to incarcerate people thousands of miles from Hawaii.

It is time we appreciated our strengths, including the wisdom of the Native Hawaiian people, in addressing our prison problem. Hawaiian culture has valued healing and reintegration more than the failed Western approaches we have been using. A larger part of our corrections budget should be spent on integrating people back into our community, instead of mainly locking people, if we want to reduce repeat crime.

Hawaii has a rich history of finding ways to help people deal with problems in restorative ways. These approaches lead to healing and resiliency. Current restorative interventions have been tested and evaluated, and shown to strengthen families, the professionals working with them, and our community.

Hawaii pioneered 'Ohana Conferencing to address child welfare problems. This group process is based on Hawaiian and Maori family interventions. It is a simple process, but not easy to provide. Family and friends sit in a circle with loved ones having difficulties with their children, along with any professionals working with them, to find ways to keep children safe. Another successful intervention is the E Makua Ana Youth Circle, a process for foster youth to plan for independence and leaving state custody. Thousands of circles and conferences have been successfully provided to countless youth and people in our state.

Six years ago a similar process, Huikahi Restorative Circles, was developed for imprisoned people and their families. More than 340 people have participated in these circles, including prison staff, and have found them positive. The children and parents of the imprisoned people have addressed the trauma and pain they have suffered by having a parent or child incarcerated. Giving families, who are usually crime victims, opportunities to heal makes our community stronger. Research also shows the circles reduce repeat crime and substance abuse, and even when there is a relapse, the families continue being highly satisfied with the process.

In 1973 Hawaii reportedly had the lowest recidivism rate in the United States. Russell Takaki, well known in Hawaii's surfing history, was the head of our parole office in the days of its 5 percent recidivism rate. Takaki valued rehabilitation and believed people could change. The Russ Takaki Restorative Parole Officer Award has been instituted to honor and celebrate other parole officers with similar strengths. This year Hawaii parole officer Jo DesMarets received the award.

Changing the way we use our corrections dollars would be simple, but not easy to do. We have the resources, and now need the leadership and the commitment to make the changes.

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