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Invest in ways to keep people out of prison

By Lorenn Walker
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From 1978 to 2014, Hawaii's prison population increased 654 percent. Instead of spending most of the Department of Public Safety's annual \$250 million budget on prisons, and working to build a new one estimated to cost \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion, the state should be finding ways these resources can address the social and educational issues underlying most crime in Hawaii.

The criminal justice system does not solve most social problems, including mental health, substance abuse, homelessness, learning difficulties, economic instability and the discrimination that Native Hawaiians suffer, evidenced by their disproportionate imprisonment. These social problems increase crime.

The average education level for an imprisoned person in Hawaii is the sixth grade, and many imprisoned people suffer from serious mental health problems. The Honolulu Police Department reports that 61 percent of its arrests involve people who have mental health and substance abuse problems, and that 43 percent in its cellblocks are homeless.

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Instead of continuing to use the criminal justice system to react to these social problems, the state should strengthen schools, increase mental health services, provide housing, and employment and training opportunities.

The state could start by ensuring that all people who leave prison have legal identification, a place to live, job skills or participation in some meaningful activity, drug treatment, and have worked on restoring their family and community relationships. Improve learning opportunities for youth having school difficulties. Instead of expelling troubled students into the wider community, where they continue to go untreated, help them learn the social and academic skills needed for successful lives.

Treat substance abuse like a health problem, not a criminal problem. Portugal, with a population of about 10 million, is a model for successful decriminalization (not legalization) of substance abuse. Fifteen years after deciding to treat substance abuse as a health problem, Portugal cut its prison population, and decreased substance abuse, HIV cases and the number of deaths from overdoses.

Instead of working to prevent and reduce imprisonment, our state wants to continue incarcerating at its current level and support the harmful private prison industry. Hawaii imprisons about 5,800 people for about \$140 a day per person — \$51,100 annually for one person. Hawaii's Legislature estimates the new prison will cost \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion. Worse than the cost, new prison construction will further entrench the prison industry in Hawaii.

Seventy-four percent of Hawaii's imprisoned people are there for Class C felonies. They could receive rehabilitation help to them become law-abiding, sober citizens while on supervised community release, paid for with the savings from decreased prison costs. This would keep our community safer since many currently leave prison with the same problems — theft related to substance abuse — that got them there.

The state could use restorative practices to help families repair damaged relationships with imprisoned loved ones. Research shows that a restorative reentry circle, which has been provided for about 130 inmates in Hawaii since 2005, decreases the trauma their children suffer as a result of their imprisonment, and helps reduce repeat crime.

Hawaii's current rate of incarceration makes our communities unsafe, damages families, and diminishes the potential for individuals with social disadvantage to do well. Spending on imprisonment additionally

takes away vital educational and social resources, harming our community further.

Proper rehabilitation, reentry, educational, restorative and social programs could reduce the number of people imprisoned. The state should be working to address the social problems driving most crimes, and finding ways to rehabilitate and release non-violent imprisoned people into supervised community settings.

If the state took these actions, it could close OCCC altogether. If you believe the state should invest in its people instead of prisons, call Gov. David Ige's office and let him know.

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