

# Hui Aloha

## A New Approach to Homelessness on Oahu

### The Problem: Seven Insights

1. **The root cause of homelessness is the gap between housing costs and wages in Hawaii.** Hawaii has had one of the highest rates of homelessness in the U.S. for more than a decade. This is not because our problems with drugs, mental illness, or unemployment are worse than other places (they aren't), but because we have a larger gap between housing costs and wages than anywhere else in the nation. This gap has strained and broken many of our families and communities -- the most important "safety nets" for people on the brink of homelessness.



Source: National Low Income Housing Coalition Out of Reach, 2020.

2. **The free market is unable to solve the problem.** The [United Way ALICE Report](#) found that nearly half of all Hawaii households struggle to afford monthly necessities, including housing. On top of that, the [2019 Hawaii Housing Planning Study](#) projects a need for 50,000 housing units to serve new housing demand from 2020 to 2025 with the "lion's share...concentrated at the lowest HUD income levels." Indeed, 6,500 new units are needed just for new households earning under \$45,000 per year. For-profit developers are typically unwilling or unable to build for these lowest-income segments of the market, even with government incentives and concessions.



Source: National Low Income Housing Coalition Out of Reach, 2020.

**3. Government faces well-documented barriers to producing affordable housing**, including: (1) limited public funding for affordable housing; (2) the high cost of upgrading infrastructure (sewer, roads); (3) long timelines for permitting and land-use entitlements (that add to development costs), and (4) Not In My Back Yard (NIMBY) opposition to projects. Overcoming these barriers will require government to partner with communities (especially those in need of housing), in new ways in order to unlock new resources and new political support for affordable housing.

**4. Emergency shelter and transitional housing are a frustrating “revolving door” for many.** We currently push people toward time-limited congregate shelters (incentivized to discharge people within 90-days) with the promise that shelters will help get people housing. People give up belongings, pets, and relationships to enter shelters, but without enough permanent affordable housing in Hawaii, many end up back on the street when their time expires. Further, many shelter facilities are chronically understaffed, leading to bed bugs, unclean bathrooms, or draconian rules to help outnumbered staff maintain order. As a result, many have had negative experiences in shelters, and avoid them.

**5. Criminalizing homelessness has made it harder for people to get off the streets.** “Sweeps” of homeless encampments have intensified over the past several years, making it harder (and more expensive) for service providers to find and serve their clients. Possessions are taken during sweeps including IDs, bicycles, work clothes, and other items essential to getting housing, services or jobs. To justify sweeps, government officials label “the homeless” as “service resistant” and a “threat to health and safety” that must be forced into shelters, feeding the stereotypes that undercut public support for programs and fueling NIMBYism against new shelters or affordable housing.

**6. An enforcement-centric approach wastes taxpayer dollars and human resources.** Police have been the City’s “tip of the spear” on homelessness, but lack the training, trust, and legal tools to get people off the streets. Instead, police use repeated citations, arrests, and jail for sidewalk/park violations to move people from place to place. Dollars spent on policing, storing confiscated property, and putting people in jail for sidewalk/park offenses could be used for housing and services instead. There is no comprehensive accounting of what the City spends on homeless enforcement, but the [City’s 2020 budget](#) included \$1.1 million for “vehicles needed to continue Stored Property Ordinance/Sidewalk Nuisance Ordinance enforcement”; [City Financial Reports](#) note that street resurfacing decreased because staff were reallocated to homeless enforcement; and, police have been deployed to sweeps while [officer shortages left crimes unsolved](#).

***After 8 years of sit-lie bans and sweeps, fewer people are in shelters and more are on the street.***



- City & County of Honolulu, 8 year trends
- MORE sit-lie bans
- MORE spending on sweeps and enforcement
- LESS people in shelter
- MORE people on the street
- NO CHANGE in overall homelessness

**7. Isolation and separation keep people “homeless” even after they’re housed.** We push unhoused people out of our neighborhoods. We place them into shelters or housing that are often far from where they’ve lived, without regard to their existing relationships or support networks. Time limits and understaffing at shelters prevent people from developing relationships and community there. When we build long-term facilities or permanent affordable housing, we build them far from any neighbors. Isolation and separation make many people continue to feel homeless, even with a roof over their heads. Some who get housing end up returning to the streets as a result.

## **New Solutions: Eight Ideas**

**1. Redirect funds from sweeps to outreach centered on trust and seamless, personalized support.**

A true accounting of all sweep-related costs such as police and City staff time, property storage, the HONU/POST project, and incarceration and adjudication for park/sidewalk offenses should be conducted, and those funds redirected to enhanced outreach and case management, focused on trust-building, personalized support, and managing a client’s case all the way to sustainable placement in a home (rather than time limited shelters or vouchers). Instead of pushing temporary shelter as a precondition for getting housing or services, the City should contract for outreach and services that “meet people where they’re at,” including programs that get people directly into housing from the street.

**2. Launch a “safe spaces pilot” that designates areas where people can park or camp** and receive services. Un- or under-utilized City properties (vacant lots, parking lots, under-used parks) could be used as places where unsheltered people can find stability and where service providers can consistently reach them. Pu’uhonua O Waianae (POW) proves that such safe spaces can help serve the needs of unsheltered people in ways that temporary shelters cannot, and help people move to permanent housing when it’s fitting and available. POW’s model relies on community-building among houseless residents through community service and active roles in governance. Maui and Kauai Counties have designated select County Parks as safe spaces during the COVID-19 pandemic as well.

**3. Refocus existing shelters and transitional housing on building community and dignity** rather than solely on rapid movement to another location. Retool City contracts to make time limits flexible and include client satisfaction as a key outcome, along with improvements in physical, mental, social, and economic health. Revise client intake/agreements to include an expectation that everyone participate in community-service and community-building activities that help clients find purpose and dignity. Ensure that contracts include funding to track outcomes after people exit. The partnership between [Hale Mauiola and Hui Aloha](#) illustrates the benefits of community-building within shelters and transitional housing.

**4. Target housing funds/incentives at permanent housing for very low income people.** Inclusionary Zoning concessions, developer incentives, and housing funds have often supported projects that do not serve lowest-income households. For example, the City spent [\\$5M on 16 units of affordable housing in Waianae](#) (\$312,000/unit) with rents of \$980-\$1180/mo; and [\\$18M to build 58 units \(\\$310,000/unit\) in Ewa Beach](#) with rents still TBD. What is truly needed to address homelessness are projects with development costs and rents at half those prices. The [Kauhale at Kalaeloa](#) and [Puuhonua O Waianae Mauka](#) are two examples of projects building housing at a fraction of the cost, and with rents of roughly \$500/mo or less.

**5. Create a streamlined permitting pathway for truly affordable community development.** Build upon the lessons of projects launched under the Governor’s Emergency Proclamation on Homelessness (2015-2020) to define a streamlined path for development of truly affordable housing that serves the needs of very low-income people, including those currently unhoused. Define strict criteria for this expedited permitting pathway, such as that very low rent must be sustained for long periods (30 years or

more), that unhoused people be served first, and that projects must be led by a nonprofit developer. Kahauiki Village, Puuhonua O Waianae, and the Kalaeloa Kauhale provide some useful examples.

**6. Utilize City lands/properties to help solve the problem.** Many of the City's affordable housing developments (e.g., Kahauiki Village, the Ewa Beach modular project) utilize City lands to reduce development costs and pass savings on to renters. Kauai, Maui, and Hawaii Counties have used County Parks or other County-owned lands to create affordable shelter or housing for residents in need.

**7. Acquire underutilized properties for affordable community development.** The City has acquired underutilized land at affordable prices to reduce development costs and pass savings on to residents of affordable housing (e.g., Kauhale Kamaile). The economic fallout from COVID-19 may create opportunities for the City to acquire properties cheaply, including vacant hotels and commercial properties. Federal CARES Act funds might also be used to acquire such properties and convert them into affordable communities for local residents.

**8. Lead us away from NIMBYism and back to Aloha.** As noted above, the City's enforcement-centric approach to homelessness has reinforced stereotypes of houseless people, undermined public support for homeless programs, and fueled NIMBYism that prevents affordable community development. What we need instead are leaders who call upon the public to be part of the solution, who engage with houseless folks as part of "us" rather than "them," and who steer all of us back to an ethic of Aloha.