

HOMELESSNESS

Homeless advocate and worker Jason Espero sees the problem every day in helping find shelter for the homeless who live on the streets of Waikiki: people who are down on their luck, hopeful for a job that will pay enough to enable them to afford a decent apartment, with children to support, and no family to help them ride out the tide of misfortune. The confluence of shrinking private and public funds and the rising cost of living have led to an increase in the numbers of persons and families forced out of suitable shelter to the outdoors.

“One major problem is that people’s income is not enough for market housing, so they end up on the street. The solution – this is easier said than done – is more availability of low-income, affordable housing. It could be government owned or public-private partnerships, where the government issues public land to a private developer with the requirement that the complex have say, 25% of units priced for lower income individuals or families.” Jason says.

Homelessness continues to be a major problem on Oahu and in our nation. From Waimanalo to Waianae, North Shore to Waikiki, homeless individuals can be found in parks, along the road, wandering about downtown, and anywhere they can find a place to sleep without being asked to leave.

Many circumstances drive people out of their homes: serious health problems, mental health conditions, war veterans, foster youths who have aged out of the system but are still not ready to be on their own, substance abuse, migration, and for many, the inability to earn enough money to pay rent.

The University of Hawaii’s Center on the Family and the Department of Human Services’ Homeless Programs Office, in 2010, there were 15,604 homeless persons statewide, with 11,101 of those on Oahu alone. Thirty-five percent of those who live in shelters and 10% of those on the streets are children and youth. Mothers and their children comprise 76% of the families who live in shelters and 62% of the families on the streets. About 1/3 of those in shelters and 42% of those on the streets have been homeless between 1-11 months.

This year the legislature has tackled this problem through several bills and resolutions. Two measures I introduced are SB 95, which would have allowed a tent city or safe zone at Sand Island, and SCR 95 / SR 52, which would allow a homeless person who own a car to park at Aloha Stadium or other government parking lots during certain evening hours such as from 10pm – 6am. Too often homeless persons with cars park in residential neighborhoods, along public parks or beaches, in downtown or areas where they will not be noticed or bothered. Parking at Aloha Stadium, for example, would allow them a place that could be safe with security and toilets as well.

A tent city at Sand Island is somewhat isolated yet still close to downtown. There are no homes nearby so the NIMBY factor should not be an issue. The park is seldom used, and it is large enough for partial usage only. Toilets and showers are already in place, and services can

be provided there by government, churches, and non-profits. Security would have to be provided, and rules followed by those staying at Sand Island. As of this writing, my Sand Island bill is not moving, unfortunately.

Measures that are still alive include:

HB 70, *Return-to-Home Program* – establishes assistance for eligible homeless individuals to return to their home state if a support network is able to receive them.

HCR 225 / HR 196, *Kanaka Villages for Homeless Native Hawaiians* – requests the Office of Hawaiian Affairs to study the feasibility of establishing kanaka villages for homeless native Hawaiians.

HCR 265 / HR 227, *Homeless on Leeward Coast* – urges the Governor to release or restore funding for programs serving the homeless population in leeward Oahu.

SB 897, *Interagency Council* – establishes Hawaii Interagency Council on Homelessness under the Department of Human Services.

SB 900, *Safe Havens* – appropriates funds for safe haven for homeless.

SB 904, *Housing First* – require Department of Human Services to locate suitable properties for a housing first program to implement affordable rental housing projects.

SB 912, *Housing Placement & Other Programs* – appropriates funds for the housing placement program, and to improve and increase existing stock of public and affordable rental housing.

If you would like to support any of these bills or resolutions, you can testify in favor of its passage. Go to www.capitol.hawaii.gov, and click on “Submit Testimony.” Testimony can be taken online, by email to the committee hearing the bill, fax, or in person. You can also click on “Bill Status & Documents” to view all bills still alive and being considered in this year’s Legislature.