

## **Restorative Justice Needs New Mindset**

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The Hawai'i Friends of Restorative Justice (HFRJ) supports the former Department of Public Safety name change to the Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. We believe that the people who will lead the rehabilitation section of the newly named department will bring fresh and research-supported strategies to help make our community safer. Our organization is, however, concerned with some of the department's top management that has been there for several decades and will lead the entire department. Over the years these top administrators have demonstrated a lack of understanding of research-based best practice for rehabilitation and security.

They have said "security comes first." What they fail to understand is that security comes from treating people with dignity and giving them agency and the opportunity to learn and grow, not from merely punishing them. Eventually almost everyone is released from incarceration, and they often are increasingly embittered and disruptive because of their punishment and inhumane treatment. This makes our community less safe.

How often do we read about someone who's been repeatedly incarcerated and does some terrible thing? People usually ask: "Why weren't they locked up?" We believe the question should instead be: "What did the Department of Public Safety do to help that person change and become law abiding all those times that they were incarcerated?"

There are well known interventions that can help transform behavior and reduce repeat criminal activity. Despite the availability of such impactful strategies, the Department has failed in its commitment to rehabilitation and the implementation of helpful interventions. This failure cannot be

attributed to inadequate funding as, in 2023 alone, the Department received a substantial \$245 million for the incarceration of approximately 4000 people.

We know today that almost one half of the incarcerated suffer from mental health disorders and that many people leaving prison suffer trauma from being incarcerated. After release, the formerly incarcerated often are abnormally disturbed by sudden noises, are hyper-vigilant, and can suffer many other emotional and mental problems. Malina Kaulukukui, a retired social work professor, haku ho'oponopono, and kumu hula who has provided programs for the incarcerated for years, says: "No one should leave prison without therapy."

HFRJ has published over 20 peer reviewed articles on a restorative and therapeutic reentry process developed in Hawai'i. The Huikahi Reentry Planning Circle process helps children and families address the trauma of losing a loved one to incarceration; can help reduce repeat crime; and is cost effective and can help decrease mass incarceration. Several of the department's current top management have never supported the implementation of the Circle program, despite the legislature giving it the funds to do so both in 2007 and in 2022. These same managers also refused to partner on a federal grant with our organization in 2010 to implement the Huikahi Circle program.

Restorative justice programs are not a panacea and will not be effective for everyone. But they are powerful in making prisons and the community safer by giving victims of crime and injustice opportunities to address their needs and by giving the incarcerated the opportunity to be accountable to repair any damage they have caused. Restorative justice is about healing for everyone that can make our community safer. Top administrators in the newly named Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation need to read and understand research if they intend to make a meaningful impact in reducing repeat crime to make our community safer.

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