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January 9, 2022

**Hawai'i State Correctional Systems Oversight Commission**

Commission Chair Mark Patterson

Commission Members

Hon. Ronald Ibarra (ret.)

Martha Torney Hon.

Michael Town (ret.)

Theodore Sakai

Dear Commission Chair Patterson and Commission Members,

Building billion dollar “gentler, nicer” cages won’t make Hawai'i safer.

Instead of signing blank checks for enhancing jail infrastructure the state needs to stop its reliance on policing and jailing to address social and economic issues. When nearly half of Hawai'i's jailed population is Hawaiian and Pacific Islander, most people remain locked up because they cannot afford bail and when the reason many people are in incarceration is because they lack housing, healthcare, and mental health services, we know new “gentler, nicer cages” are not a solution.

We need community-based solutions and alternatives to incarceration. Countless research, from university-based studies to reports from street-level service providers, find time and time again that approaches that use community-based solutions to harm and violence, have exponentially better outcomes. Investments in [housing](#), [health care](#), [jobs programs](#), [education](#), [after school programs](#), [gun control](#), [environmental design](#), and [violence interruption programs](#) have all been proven to quantifiably reduce violence. For example, one [study](#) found that every additional community-focused nonprofit in a medium-sized city leads to a 12 percent reduction in homicide rate, a 10 percent reduction in violent crime, and a 7 percent reduction in property crime. Outcomes that keep families intact, assist loved ones to overcome the hardships of addiction, reduce the likelihood of repeated harm, increase community stability—rather than locking people up.

We need increased funding for residential treatment programs & outpatient mental health and substance abuse treatment services. Prioritizing mental health and treatment should be a top priority for any community that values community stability, health, and wellbeing. Funding treatment programs not only prevents people from doing time to begin with, but also helps those coming home transition more successfully back into the community.

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We need real crisis response. The uniquely American dependence on police as first responders to every social problem is the product of decades of reliance on antiquated and [disproven theories](#) about safety, the fearmongering of powerful [police lobbyists](#), and policymakers' racist support for devastatingly harmful [militarized policing in communities of color](#). Policing as a one-size-fits-all solution to violence is simply a bad and dangerous policy choice made by elected officials — one they now have a responsibility to correct.

Investing in a 24/7 non-police crisis response mobile unit will substantially make our streets and homes safer for every resident in Hawai'i. [According to a 2021 guide](#) reviewing mobile crisis response programs, for mobile crisis response programs to effectively reduce or eliminate harmful interactions with police and further cycling people with disabilities into the carceral system. This report highlighted that: “person with unmet mental health needs is 16 times more likely to be killed by the police. These alarming figures do not reflect the mass incarceration of people with mental and cognitive disabilities and unmet mental health needs locked up in jails in prisons, conservatively estimated at bookings numbering 2 million every year, in psychiatric institutions, in emergency rooms, homeless/houseless in the streets, and dying by suicide or overdose every day.”

We need healthcare. Regular and preventive care for people of all ages and backgrounds has been proven to have a positive effect on all aspects of community stability and sustainability. People coming home from jail and prison don't have health insurance (and half don't even have proper identity documents), let alone adequate health care. Increase funding for programs such as transition clinics that serve people coming home from prison. Make sure everyone coming out of jail and prison, regardless of their migrant status, knows they can apply for health insurance and get linked to medical care.

We need job training programs and living wage jobs for all workers, including undocumented workers. Access to meaningful work and job training, education and healthcare, should be a core value and top funding priority for any city or county that values community stability, health, and wellbeing. People with records need vocational programs that address the specific obstacles they face in finding employment. In 1998, Hawaii was one of the first states to pass Ban the Box legislation and lessened the “look-back” period for employers, but we must do more to change attitudes of discrimination in the hiring of people with records.

These plans to waste upwards of a billion dollars on new cages in Hawai'i and not in real solutions to addressing violence and harm only further solidify that prisons and jails **perpetrate it**. Caging people in Hawai'i was never about and never will be about accountability, healing, justice, and genuine safety and security.

Sincerely,

**Shayna Lonoaea-Alexander**