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My View

It's possible to end veteran homelessness in Hawaii

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As a veteran, I have the honor of serving as the chair of the Homeless Veterans Task Force, a group of local retired military flag officers and enlisted personnel representing all branches of the armed services, as well as foundation and community leaders who support President Obama's and Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert McDonald's goal to end veteran homelessness in Hawaii by the end of this year.



TINA YUEN PBN

John Henry Felix

We have benefited from national evidence-based best practices used in other cities and states, as well as input from Colin Kippen, former Hawaii Interagency Council chair. We also appreciate the recent visit to Hawaii of both VA Secretary McDonald and Department of Labor Secretary Perez to encourage our efforts. We have been buoyed by what our homeless service providers have accomplished in creating a common access and housing placement system to meet the needs of homeless individuals, including veterans. We have witnessed the success of cities such as Houston, Phoenix and New Orleans in ending veteran homelessness; and Utah's success in ending chronic homelessness.

Hawaii has the highest rate of homelessness per capita in the nation. If other states can succeed using these best practices, why shouldn't Hawaii?

Ending homelessness in our community is within our reach and we believe we can meet the national goal of ending veteran homelessness by the year's end — and in ending all homelessness if we do the following:

Focus on best practices that actually end homelessness. National evidence strongly suggests conducting homeless “sweeps” – moving the homeless from one place to another – can be harmful and expensive. A recent study from the University of Hawaii Graduate School of Urban and Regional Planning lays out the property and economic losses, the physical and psychological harm, and the potential constitutional violations homeless individuals have endured by these sweeps. Costwise, the city to date has spent approximately \$750,000 on these cleanups. The state Department of Transportation has spent similar amounts on its homeless cleanups in state highway rights of way. The state has a plan to end veteran homelessness this year and to end overall chronic homelessness next year. That plan is based on the idea that permanent housing is the answer to homelessness. Just think how far ahead we would be if we had invested in permanent housing instead of sweeping the homeless people away.

Set a goal and a reduction number, and measure every part of the system against it. There is an old adage: what gets measured gets done. The Hawaii Interagency Council on Homelessness, the Partners In Care and the Continuum of Care for Oahu have used this system to set a goal of ending veteran homelessness on Oahu this year, and of ending chronic homelessness next year. They have consulted our annual “point in time” counts, reviewed the relevant rates of recidivism for these populations and projected a target number that they must fulfill. Regular meetings are held where reports are shared and agencies work together to address homelessness. Since this system has been in existence, 396 veterans have been housed – 71 were chronically homeless – an average of 56 per month since January 2015. This is an approach that should be applied and followed if we are to demonstrate progress.

Work together. We know that to succeed in ending veteran homelessness by the end of the year we must all work together. Our homeless task force is ready and committed to working with Gov. David Ige and the new administration to end veteran homelessness. For this to become a reality we need the commitment and assistance of landlords to dedicate units to house veterans who have HUD-VASH vouchers, but who are still looking for housing. In addition, we also need employers

to hire our unemployed veterans. We know that our efforts with veterans will help build a more effective system to address the needs of all homeless populations in the future.

Homelessness is a complex and multifaceted issue that affects many groups within our state: veterans, individuals, families, and children. Moreover, there are many who are “at risk” of becoming homeless, some who are only one paycheck away from living on the streets. Compassion teaches us: “there but for the grace of God go I.”

Homelessness can be ended if we have the resolve and the political will to do so. We must invest in policies that have been shown to work, we must bring them to scale as soon as possible, and we must marshal our efforts to end veteran homelessness throughout Hawaii by the end of the year.

By working together, we make progress. Pūpukahi i holomua.