

Our Voices Count Too!

by the Oahu Lived Experience Council

This election year, we know that homelessness is one of the top concerns of voters. There are many misconceptions about homelessness, and discussions about it usually do not include people who have lived it. So this summer, houseless¹ people from Waianae, Waimanalo, Sand Island, and Kakaako gathered to voice our own ideas and concerns. Here are some things we think anyone who cares about this issue should understand:

- We are human beings, too. We each have our own story. Please do not judge all of us based on the bad behaviors of some. Stereotypes are harmful and lead to misguided solutions.
- Most people don't "choose" to be houseless. Stay on the street through storms, sweeps, and illness. Or stay in a shelter and experience the conditions. You'll see that none of it is as easy as you think. There are many places where the system is broken, many hardships and indignities to endure.
- Temporary shelters are often not welcoming, sanitary, or safe. They require you to leave pets, friends, and belongings behind. Rules and punishments are not always fair, making shelter feel like prison. Time in shelter often ends without a housing placement, leaving you back on the street, with less than you had before.
- Shelters, transitional facilities, and temporary vouchers aren't real solutions. They are "band-aids" with time-limits that don't match the reality of what it actually takes to get and stay housed in Hawaii. This system of short-term help leaves many of us feeling hopeless.
- Money spent on sweeps should be used for housing or other permanent solutions. Sweeps only move us from place to place, while taking away things we need to get housed: IDs and vital documents, connections to service providers, and our sense of humanity.
- More than just housing, what's needed is time and space to connect with a caring community. It takes a village to raise a child. It also takes a village to help people heal and grow. Community fosters safety, healing, and the sense of *kuleana* that wakes up *mana*.
- We deserve protection from police, fire fighters, and first responders just like everyone else. Too often, these protectors treat us like problems, not people.
- Many of us work to keep the areas we live clean and safe. We clean park bathrooms, sweep sidewalks, and try to support others. If we had safe, stable places to be, we would work to build communities that help both houseless and housed heal, grow, and wake our *mana* together.

We want to work with elected leaders, service providers, and our communities on real solutions to homelessness, instead of the band-aids and temporary fixes we currently have. We invite any leader who wants to learn more to come stay in one of our encampments to build a true understanding of houselessness. If you aren't willing or able to stay, we invite you to at least come and talk story with us. We can also send speakers with lived experience to talk with anyone who wants to work on new solutions together.

There is much more to share. If you would like to connect, you can reach us through www.hui aloha.org/livedexperience.

The Oahu Lived Experience Council is comprised of people who are currently or recently have been houseless on Oahu.

¹ We prefer the term "houseless" because Hawaii is our home, we just don't have houses.