



Gathering Place: Kat Brady

Helping isle inmates re-enter society is sensible, saves money

Ohana means family, and family means no one gets left behind. But, in fact, many of our people do get left behind. Some get left behind because they broke the law, the consequences of which have branded them with the scarlet F for felon. For our people who have been incarcerated, making the transition from institutional to community life -- the re-entry process -- can be difficult without help.

Our Legislature wisely recognized this need, and re-entry was the centerpiece of corrections legislation for the Public Safety committees in both the House and the Senate last session. Senate Bill 932 -- the Community Safety Act, now awaiting the governor's signature -- establishes a re-entry system for adults exiting prison, authorizes the Hawaii Paroling Authority to parole people to the island where they have the most support, and funds innovative programs designed to reduce recidivism by rebuilding lives, restoring ohana and revitalizing communities.

SB 932 funds restorative circles, a unique program designed in Hawaii to repair the harm from wrongdoing, re-entry programs and projects, a pilot day reporting center, Maui's successful BEST Reintegration Program, and a cognitive restructuring program on Hawaii island.

There is broad acknowledgement that more than 95 percent of our incarcerated people will return to the community. How do we want these folks to return to our communities? Don't we want people to come home with the skills necessary to find meaningful employment and with a desire to become contributing members of our community? Wouldn't it be better, and safer, if everyone exiting incarceration had a "life plan" to help them navigate their way through the free world? Of course, a life plan would be great for everyone, but it is especially important for people who have either lost their way or never found it.

There is plenty of research that affirms re-entry programs reduce recidivism, promote pro-social behavior and help ease the transition to community life for someone exiting prison. The Urban Institute's Impact and Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Maryland Re-entry Partnership Initiative released in January found that this re-entry partnership was cost-beneficial, returning about \$3 in benefits for every dollar in new costs.

With a recidivism rate exceeding 50 percent, Hawaii must do better. And we can.

The first step is to believe that re-entry begins the day a person is sentenced. By focusing on re-entry during and continuing after a person's incarceration, services can be directed at providing appropriate treatment and education to assist a person in developing marketable job skills to ensure a successful return home.

Creating a re-entry system that is integrated will enhance public safety.

Hawaii can create a model re-entry system that builds on a person's strengths. It should be obvious by now that focusing on a person's deficits is a losing and expensive strategy.

Creating a real re-entry system in Hawaii will ensure that no one gets left behind ... because we are all ohana and ohana means family, and family means no one gets left behind.

Please urge the governor (Governor.Lingle@hawaii.gov or 586-0034) to sign SB 932.

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<http://starbulletin.com/2007/06/24/editorial/commentary.html>