

Homeless Court on Oahu, Hawaii – A Successful Experiment

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SHORT COMMUNICATION

Since January 26, 2017, an alternative court trial was offered to homeless individuals on Oahu, in Hawaii. This is the island where Honolulu is located in the island chain of the 50th state of the U.S. Many of the homeless have minor crimes such as trespassing and operating without a driver's license. These cases clog up the court system and many of the homeless are unable to make their court hearings due to problems of travel, etc. It was the brain child of the chief prosecutor's office, Keith Kaneshiro, Oahu Public Defender Jack Tonaki, and Hawaii Supreme Court Justice Mark Rectenwald. The purpose was to help clear the backlog of cases and provide alternative sentencing for homeless unable to pay fines. As well, these persons can clear their record which stands in the way of housing and employment opportunities while being matched with various supportive services offered by the state. The Justice Department is partially funding this initiative (City and County of Honolulu, 2017). Hawaii News now (Mendoza, 2017) interviewed some of the clients who had records cleared and their gratitude was overwhelming to the point of shedding tears. For many, this gives the opportunity of a fresh start on life.

Previously, offenders of this nature would be required to attend hearings in the Honolulu District Court (City and County of Honolulu, 2017). Offering this alternative is more effective in terms of clearing cases, offering alternative penalties by way of assigned community service, and also matching with supportive services that helps allows these persons to get employment and housing. In December 2017, the court expanded its services even more by holding a "road trip" hearing set-up in Wahiawa, in the rural area

outside of Honolulu on Oahu (Mendoza, 2017). This allowed individuals to participate in their own neighborhood who otherwise could not travel to Honolulu. The success of these homeless courts is phenomenal in terms of the number of cases it has cleared up and hours of community service rendered. From January 2017 to December 2017, 599 cases have been settled, most for nuisance cases (City and County of Honolulu, 2017). In the Wahiawa area hearings for 15 minutes, 81 cases were solved and removed from the court records (Mendoza, 2017). The court has established a record of successful outcomes. Some results are getting people in housing, employment and in shelters (as opposed to squatting or camping in parks, on sidewalks, etc) (Mendoza, 2017). The official name is "Community Outreach Court" and serves as a role model to help communities who struggle with homelessness (City and County of Honolulu, 2017).

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