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# Hawai‘i needs fewer prisoners, not more prisons

By Lorenn Walker and Bob Merce

On Nov. 9, the Star-Advertiser quoted Gov.-elect David Ige as saying:

"We need to make an investment in our prison system. I do think it is an opportunity for public-private partnership. We have a private partner on the mainland that we ship prisoners to; if we can find a partner who is willing to make an investment in Hawaii and the state has lots of land, it would allow us to build a modern facility, it would help reduce the cost. There is a way to fashion a win-win that would allow us to move forward" ("The governor-elect wants to modernize tax collections and encourage 'small ag'," Star-Advertiser, On Politics).

We think that building new prisons with private partners is a bad idea that should be rejected by the people of Hawaii.

Instead of building new prisons, we should reduce our prison population by investing in education.

Most youth who become seriously involved with the criminal justice system have drug problems, and many youth who have drug problems first had learning problems. If these facts do not make it clear that there is a relationship between education and crime, please consider that the average education level of Hawaii prisoners is the sixth grade.

Prisons are not an "investment" in the future. Prisons, as Phil Zimbardo's remarkable 1971 research from Stanford University shows, are institutions that often breed crime and corruption.

The U.S. Department of Justice said a few months ago: "Prison sentences are unlikely to deter future crime. Prisons actually may have the opposite effect: Inmates learn more effective crime strategies from each other, and time spent in prison may desensitize many to the threat of future imprisonment."



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Hawaii spends about \$250 million a year on a prison system that does not effectively reform or rehabilitate because most released prisoners eventually come back to prison. It is senseless to perpetuate a multi-million dollar system that does not work, and often makes people more criminal, which endangers our community.

While Ige talks about building new prisons with a private partner, other states are wisely moving in the opposite direction. Texas, Minnesota, Kentucky and Idaho terminated their relationships with private prison operators and are seeking innovative and cost-effective ways to improve their justice systems.

In November, California voters, fed up with the high cost of incarceration, approved Proposition 47, which provides that those convicted of certain "non-serious nonviolent crimes" like petty theft and possession of small amounts of illegal drugs, will not go to prison unless they have a prior conviction for murder, sexual assault or a crime involving gun use. California's new law is expected to dramatically reduce its prison population and save hundreds of millions of dollars for public education instead.

When states build new prisons, ways to fill them are found, and far too many of our people are in prison already. If Hawaii were a country instead of a state, we would rank among the top 30 incarcerators in the world. Our tiny state imprisons a higher percentage of its population than Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Kazakhstan. Making matters worse, a disproportionate number of the incarcerated are Native Hawaiians.

Hawaii is at a crossroads. We can stay on the old path of spending millions of dollars on prisons or we can divert people who commit non-violent offenses away from prison, and we can use the savings for education, substance abuse treatment and rehabilitative programs.

Partnering with private corporations, which depend on criminal behavior as the "raw material" to generate profits, would be a terrible mistake for ethical and economical reasons.

Please urge Ige and other policymakers to decrease prison use and abandon any plans for partnering with private for-profit prison companies.