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COMMENTARY

Alternatives to youth detention imperative

By Frances Q.F. Wong

On July 17, we broke ground in Kapolei for a much-needed secured juvenile detention facility to replace the present building, which according to the National Juvenile Detention Association is "plagued by falling plaster, lack of ventilation, sewage, plumbing and electrical problems ... (and) needs to be replaced." A recent partial roof collapse from termite damage reminds us that ground-breaking comes not a moment too soon.

Unfortunately, a new juvenile detention facility often comes with tacit pressure from the community to "lock up more kids" simply because beds are available. We must resist any such temptation. The more beds we fill, the greater we fail our children and our community.

Research shows that secured detention is a dangerous setting for juveniles.

Reliance upon detention must be reduced. To do so, effective and nonsecure detention program alternatives must be available. Our juvenile detention system must encompass alternatives that are culturally competent, relevant and accessible to the youths they serve.

These alternatives must be designed and operated on the principle of using the least restrictive alternative possible. Successful options used on the Mainland include supervision/outreach detention, home confinement, electronic monitoring, day and evening reporting centers and a crisis stabilization network.

Releasing juveniles from a secure detention facility into the least-restrictive alternative is not tantamount to a "jail break." Years of experience by successful Mainland sites establish that detention reform and public safety are not only compatible, but that effective detention reforms actually improve public safety. This makes sense.

Placing a juvenile charged with a low-level drug or theft offense in the same facility as juveniles charged with violent offenses has long-lasting negative consequences for both public safety and youth development. The consequences for inappropriately or unnecessarily detaining juveniles are expensive and far-reaching.

Research conducted by the Juvenile Detention Alternative Initiative, a program launched by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, shows that detention is a strong predictor of future delinquency and criminality. Juveniles who spend time in pretrial custody are three times more likely to end up in prison.

It is imperative that we develop viable options to secure detention. We hope to use the site of the present detention facility for such alternatives as an evening reporting center, an observation and assessment center, and a day school for juveniles.

The use of effective detention alternatives assures that youths who do not require "lock-up" are supervised in less expensive programs and that they receive needed services. Placement in the detention continuum will be based upon an individualized assessment of each youth's potential danger to the community and likelihood of flight.

Clearly, it takes a special type of person to work with our troubled youth. Because the detention facility must be staffed 24 hours a day, seven days a week, workers have varying schedules that often include weekends, holidays and significant overtime. This makes it difficult to recruit and retain qualified, competent workers.

Recently, we have focused on providing juvenile detention workers enhanced training on such issues as safety, behavior management, identifying crisis, communication and suicide prevention. Although effective, training cannot substitute for proper staffing and support.

We have six new positions and hope to secure additional positions in the next biennium budget. However, given the current tight labor market, it may be difficult to attract the needed caliber of employees. These realities have consequences to both staff and the juveniles served. Working under less-than-optimal conditions or not having the requisite skills for working with troubled juveniles may lead staff to deal inappropriately or ineffectively with the juveniles with whom they are entrusted.

Thankfully, despite obvious burdens, the NJDA report lists our juvenile detention staff as one of our strengths.

The new secured detention facility is simply the first step in the reform needed. Stakeholders, including legislators and community members, must understand that alternatives to detention will, in the long run, reduce the need for funds that would otherwise go toward incarcerating juveniles once they become adults, and that we must hire and retain the best staff possible to deal effectively with these youth.

Stakeholders (including the Judiciary, Legislature, Office of Youth Services, departments of education and health, community mental health organizations, public defenders, prosecutors, probation officers and police) must work together to re-engineer a system that works for both those who choose to work within it and those who do not have the luxury of that choice.

We recently launched an Interagency Services Team to assist stakeholders in working collaboratively to provide needed services for detained juveniles. This is an important step in ensuring that all stakeholders can and will commit to accomplishing juvenile detention reform.

Hopefully, the same leaders who responded to our calls for a new detention facility will also understand and appreciate that constructing a building is just the first step in rethinking and revamping a juvenile justice system that supports both our youth and our communities.

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