

Hawaii Alliance Calls for Shift in Approach to Homelessness

A consortium of Hawaii service providers has renewed the debate over whether clearing homeless encampments actually convinces homeless people to seek shelter.

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HONOLULU (AP) — An alliance of Hawaii service providers renewed the debate over whether clearing homeless encampments convinces homeless people to seek shelter.

The consortium Partners in Care wants money spent on enforcement to be redirected to housing as well as mental health and drug treatment programs, Hawaii News Now reported Tuesday.

Gavin Thornton, the alliance's advocacy chairman, said sweeps should only happen if public safety is at risk.

"Where do folks go?" Thornton said. "If there is no place for them to go does it really make sense for us to be moving them around?"

Scott Morishige, the governor's homeless coordinator, backed the state's current approach to homelessness. He said enforcement efforts are designed to help — not hurt — people living on the street.

"I think it's about balance," Morishige said. "Making sure you balance public safety with the needs of people experiencing homelessness."

Morshige also said that encampments left unchecked can lead to serious health and safety concerns.

He pointed to an encampment in Kakaako, which had grown to more than 300 people in 2015.

"If somebody decides they want to go into housing, that they want to take the outreach worker up on going to shelter we are providing people that opportunity for people to do that," he said. "We're also not just throwing their items away. There is a process to store items to make sure homeless people can get those items back."

Thornton, however, said he believes a break from sweeps could be a key in getting the upper hand on the crisis.

"It's really important that we allow people to develop some stability in their lives," Thornton said. "Even if they're homeless, that stability is the most likely way they're going to get out of a bad situation."

The city, which has a policy of "compassionate disruption," declined to be interviewed.

Information from: KGMB-TV, <http://www.hawaiinewsnow.com/>

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