

# Column: Save lone halfway house for women inmates

By Dana Tokioka and Noriko Namiki • June 23, 2020 • Updated 4:29 p.m.

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Hawaii's only re-entry program for women inmates located outside of their prison cells is about to close, by the end of this month.

The Department of Public Safety (DPS) recently decided to end the Correctional Work Furlough and Halfway House Program for Women Inmates on Oahu. We understand the financial hardships every state agency is going through, but we urge our leaders to consider investing in the future.

YWCA Oahu has been honored to operate this program at its transitional housing Fernhurst in Makiki since July 2015. Prior to that, T. J. Mahoney & Associates, Inc., a Las Vegas-based nonprofit, developed and ran the program for more than 20 years. Last year, Mahoney Hale closed its doors — ending the only federal halfway house program for men and women in Hawaii.

This program is designed to be gender-responsive, trauma-informed and culturally sensitive, addressing the unique needs of women inmates. It also supports re-entry and rehabilitation, a model encouraged nationwide.

The contract amount has been just enough to cover basic housing and case management services. YWCA Oahu raises additional funds to provide enough resources to ensure women's successful re-entry into the community. This effort extends to providing clean clothes and toiletries. All program participants receive wrap-around services from life-skill coaching, to job readiness and retention.

During the height of the COVID-19 crisis, YWCA Oahu made a conscious choice to keep Fernhurst open. The closure of the building would have meant that women in the work furlough program might return to the Women's Community Correctional Center and women in the transitional housing program could immediately become homeless. We have been dealing with 100% of the additional costs incurred as a result of that choice.

Over the last five years under the contract, we have served almost 200 women at Fernhurst, and nearly 80% of them successfully completed the program. More than half of our residents are Native Hawaiian. More than three-quarters of them are mothers.

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Of those who successfully completed the program between 2015 and the first quarter of 2019, 84% are not incarcerated, a recidivism rate of 16%. That's less than half the statewide recidivism rate for women parolees, which is 34%.

The furlough program is also a source of savings for the state.

According to DPS' 2019 report, it costs an average of \$198/day for the state to house an inmate. The contract amount under the furlough program is \$120/day. In addition, keeping just one individual out of prison for one year would result in a net savings to the state of more than \$72,000. As these women become income-producing, they can provide for their families and pay

taxes. They shift from being a cost to the state to a source of revenue.

In 2017, with supportive testimony from DPS, the Legislature passed House Concurrent Resolution 158, which encouraged the department to continue and expand its structured, community-based work furlough program to assist female inmates.

In December 2018, HCR 85 Task Force on Prison Reform presented its final report to the Legislature: Its primary recommendation was that Hawaii immediately begin to transition from a punitive to a rehabilitative correctional system and cited Fernhurst as a model program.

The early release of inmates who do not have the means to cover basic needs will only set them up for failure. The work furlough program operated on prison grounds cannot provide the same environment as one held in a transitional environment outside of locked gates and prison cells.

The issue here is not just about a nonprofit suddenly losing a government contract, but rather, that the only re-entry resource available to women inmates outside of prison will close very soon. We ask our decision-makers to think of all the consequences before this rare resource to women in need goes away.