

COMMUNITY ALLIANCE ON PRISONS

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COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY

Rep. Faye Hanohano, Chair

Rep. Henry Aquino, Vice Chair

Thursday, February 12, 2009

Room 309

9:15 A.M.

STRONG SUPPORT – HB 334 – Community-based Reentry Beds for Women

PBSTestimony@capitol.hawaii.gov

Aloha Chair Hanohano, Vice Chair Aquino and Members of the Committee!

My name is Kat Brady and I am the Coordinator of Community Alliance on Prisons, a community initiative working to improve conditions of confinement for our incarcerated individuals, enhance our quality of justice, and promote public safety. We come today to speak for the 6,000+ individuals whose voices have been silenced by incarceration, always mindful that more than 2,000 of those individuals are serving their sentences abroad, thousands of miles from their homes and loved ones.

HB 334 requires the Department of Public Safety to develop a plan to use current funding resources to improve community-based programs to assist female offenders in transitioning from prison back into the community.

Community Alliance on Prisons is in strong support of HB 334, although we note that the description of the bill calls on PSD to use current funding, the bill calls for an appropriation. Community Alliance on Prisons believes that if PSD re-purposes the funds that they currently use to incarcerate woman and contract for gender responsive community reentry beds instead, the state would save money, formerly incarcerated women would be afforded an opportunity to rebuild their lives, work on restoring their families, and reenter the community as contributing members.

Dr. Meda Chesney-Lind highlighted some startling statistics in her testimony on a similar bill going through the Senate:

- In 1997, Hawai'i led the nation in the proportion of our state prison population that is female (10.2%); the national average is 6.4%.
- Hawai'i also had the third highest increase in the number of women incarcerated between 1996-1997: a stunning 31.2% compared to a national average of 6.2%.
- Moreover, the other two state's showing large increases all imprisoned less than 100 women, compared to the 505 Hawaii incarcerated in 1997.
- Hawai'i is the third highest in the nation in the proportion of our prison population incarcerated in other state or federal prison systems--12.1 % compared to a national average of 0.5%.

Just last week, the Department of Public Safety reported that women are now 16% of Hawai'i's incarcerated population. Sadly, most of the women are mothers and the statistics regarding children of incarcerated parents, especially moms, are startling – these children are six to seven times more likely to end up incarcerated themselves.

The reclassification study, for which the Department of Public Safety has contracted the Criminal Justice Institute, has found that 84% of incarcerated women are non-violent and that 55.2% of female jail inmates, 47.8% of the women prisoners held in Hawai'i, and 22.2% of women serving their sentences abroad are eligible for community reintegration. Hawai'i could save millions by purchasing 6-9 month reentry beds for women who the Department deems pose no threat to public safety.

Hawai'i's female incarceration is way above the national average and rising. The majority of women appear to be sentenced for low level drug offenses. We must examine the social and economic costs of incarcerating low level drug offenders, especially mothers. Elliott Currie cites in his book Crime and Punishment in America, "As James Marquart of the University of Texas and his colleagues write, *"The full impact of the growth in the female prisoner population and concomitant medical costs has yet to be fully explored or considered. Incarcerating more women, coupled with their unique health demands, will be a costly crime control policy."*

Hawai'i should not be proud that we lead the nation in the incarceration of women. Instead the fact that 16% of our incarcerated population is women should be a loud shout out that something is very wrong – so wrong that it is affecting the next generations.

There is a more effective way to help strengthen families and prison is not it. That is to treat substance abuse as the public health problem that it is and to treat it as any other disorder would be treated. Criminalizing substance abuse is only bankrupting our economy, shredding the social fabric of Hawai'i, and using precious resources that should be shoring up the safety net for Hawai'i's neediest citizens.

For more information on women in the criminal justice system, The Sentencing Project has published a number of interesting reports:

OVERVIEW: [http://www.sentencingproject.org/tmp/File/Women%20in%20CJ/women_cjs_overview\(1\).pdf](http://www.sentencingproject.org/tmp/File/Women%20in%20CJ/women_cjs_overview(1).pdf)

INVOLVEMENT WITH CRIME:

http://www.sentencingproject.org/tmp/File/Women%20in%20CJ/women_involvementincrime.pdf

MOTHERS:

http://www.sentencingproject.org/tmp/File/women_mothersinprison.pdf

INADEQUACIES OF PRISON SERVICES:

http://www.sentencingproject.org/tmp/File/Women%20in%20CJ/women_inadequaciesprisonservices.pdf

BARRIERS TO REENTRY:

http://www.sentencingproject.org/tmp/File/Women%20in%20CJ/women_barriers.pdf

Mahalo for allowing us to testify in STRONG SUPPORT of HB 334. Community Alliance on Prisons urges passage of this important bill, which can help Hawai'i's families, save money, and promote public safety.