

The Honolulu Prosecutor and a few legislators have criticized Senate Bill 2776, which seeks to reform our antiquated corrections system. Recidivism rates around 50% show that current rehabilitative practices aren't working. Governor Neil Abercrombie, Hawaii Supreme Court Chief Justice Mark Recktenwald, and legislative leaders support it.

During my years in the Legislature, many bills promised to make our state safer. This year, however, we have data-backed methods from the federal Justice Reinvestment Initiative (JRI). JRI is expected to save Hawaii \$150 million over five years by replacing the inefficient system with statistics-based, effective programs and supervision. The national project targets critical areas in our jails and prisons to increase public safety and offender accountability. JRI's empirically-driven approach identifies inefficiencies, develops cost-effective policy options, and plans for reinvesting savings to reduce recidivism. Independent experts from the mainland reviewed our data and assisted tremendously.

The \$150 million savings over 5 years comes from putting offenders through the system promptly, NOT by relying on early release policies as some states are forced to do. Many prisoners wait for programs that the evidence shows will not reduce their likelihood of committing future crimes. The current system wastefully spends on programs that don't work and keeps people in prison longer than was intended. Smooth operation of an intake and release system is cost-efficient. One of the most crucial public safety policies requires criminals to be supervised after exiting prison. Surprisingly, the most dangerous and high-risk offenders are often the ones released into the community with nobody watching, after completing their full sentence.

Offenders will return to the community, period. Opponents of JRI seem to think that years in prison will turn criminals into law-abiding citizens. Instead, JRI mandates intensive supervision of ex-prisoners upon release. This forces them to submit to random drug tests, get jobs, find stable housing, and leaves them open to search and seizure. With this supervision, we are more likely to help them get on the right track and more likely to catch them when they stray. SB 2776 adds more parole and probation officers for this. Victim advocates have strongly supported this part of the bill.

SB 2776 aims to improve how they are released, requires supervision, avoids delaying release simply due to inefficient processes or lack of timely assessment or decision-making. Without taking action, the most dangerous criminals will continue exploiting a loophole allowing them back to our neighborhoods with nobody watching. We will keep wasting scarce resources holding low-risk people in prison, putting them through programs that don't work. The status quo is not only wasteful, it's harmful to public safety.