

Honolulu city officials vote to transfer homeless to former WWII internment camp

By Kevin Martinez
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In a move that reeks of inhumanity and cruelty, the Honolulu, Hawaii city council approved several measures last week that criminalize the homeless population including an ordinance that bans sleeping or lying down on sidewalks. More ominously, plans are being made to transfer 100 of the most “chronic” homeless from Waikiki, the world famous tourist destination, to Sand Island, home to a former World War II internment camp for Japanese-Americans, wastewater treatment plant and former dump. During the early 1900’s, the island was also used as a quarantine station for immigrants.

Homeless people are now forced to move on or face being arrested if they sit or lie down in certain parts of Hawaii, especially on sidewalks in the Waikiki area. The new bill passed by City Council members also bans urinating and defecating in public throughout Oahu island. Many city council members unsurprisingly have ties to the multi-billion dollar tourism industry which wants to maintain the fiction that Hawaii is an island paradise immune to problems like homelessness and poverty.

Jim Trevarthen, a 62-year-old former surf instructor and carpenter who now lives on the streets told the Associated Press, “They’re trying to harass everyone, and they’re doing a pretty good job of it.” Trevarthen’s story is typical of the homeless who live near Waikiki Beach. His landlord increased his rent and canceled his lease, forcing him to look for places to sleep without being harassed by police and figure out where his next meal is coming from.

The city is also planning on setting up a “temporary” shelter on Sand Island that could be up-and-running in two-to-three months. City officials have stated that the campsite will provide a shelter for those homeless who are swept up by police once the bans on sitting and

lying down take effect. In an effort to downplay criticism, officials have said they will provide permanent housing as part of a program that won’t be ready for another year.

The site will be equipped with portable toilets, storage lockers, and counseling services according to the city, which will spend about \$600,000 to fund the site as part of its \$3 million “Housing First” strategy, the state’s nominal effort toward permanent housing and counseling. The city has brushed aside criticisms that the island has no shade for residents and that the potentially toxic effects of the island’s former dump can be paved over with asphalt. This “solution” however was only proposed when angry residents at a community meeting pointed out that the island was home to a former dump.

Mayor Kirk Caldwell has announced plans to “relocate,” essentially dump, the most vulnerable members of the homeless community onto the island. Many of the “chronically homeless” suffer from mental illness and substance abuse. They will be placed on the same grounds of a site that was used to dump solid waste and ash from 1934 to 1999, according to the state’s Department of Health. Ash waste would include the incomplete incineration of trash like lead batteries and other hazardous metals.

According to a Honolulu Board of Water Supply review provided by the state health department, arsenic, lead and other carcinogens were found in the soil, exceeding federal safety standards. Steven Chang, head of the state health department’s solid and hazardous waste branch told *The Honolulu Civil Beat*, “You shouldn’t let people dig six-foot holes in the ground because they will probably find ash. The history of Sand Island is it’s been a dump site for the whole time that I’ve known it.”

A cursory sample of the island's soil was taken by the state health department's Hazard Evaluation and Emergency Response Office. While none of the three samples taken showed a dangerous level of contaminants, Fenix Grange, a supervisor said the sample was limited and that a more in depth assessment would be needed to see if the island was safe for humans, who would be sleeping directly on the ground in tents. "The likely risk out there would be from inadvertent ingestion of soil, especially by children," said Grange. "So if families are living in tents with soil at elevated levels of action, that could be a concern."

Moreover, in 2005 the state Department of Transportation was considering putting shipping containers on the island and sought an assessment from the health department as to whether the site contained dangerous contaminants. The health department stated that the site was safe for containers but that more tests would be needed to determine if the site was safe for human exposure. Sand Island also has a history of petroleum contamination according to the health department records.

According to the Hawaii Interagency Council on Homelessness, a group composed of government officials and homeless providers, in a report presented in 2012 to the state legislature, creating encampments for the homeless "is unworkable, is not advisable, and should not be pursued."

The report further stated that the proposal would divert resources from permanent housing and that campsites are not only expensive to operate, but that they can't guarantee the safety and well-being of homeless people compared to permanent shelters already available. The city's proposed Sand Island camp would have private security guards, portable toilets and showers, and limited shuttle service to nearby bus hubs, but the homeless would be required to bring their own tents. City officials have said the "temporary" campsite, euphemistically called the Sand Island Housing First Transition Center, would not be in place for more than two years.

The homeless of Waikiki beach will be swept up by police once the new anti-homeless laws go into effect and will be given the "option" of getting on a bus to Sand Island or having their property confiscated.

Contrary to the postcard view of the Hawaiian Islands, the state has a notoriously high cost of living

and most jobs available are low-paying. According to spotlightonpoverty.org, the child poverty rate is 17 percent, while the percentage of single-parent families with children is 27 percent. Hawaii has the third-largest homeless population per capita in the United States with an estimated 7,500 people living on its streets and beaches on any given night. The island of Oahu is home to many impoverished native communities and homeless encampments, some of which border toxic landfills, chemical research facilities, and pesticide test crops. Hawaii's poverty rate based on US Census Bureau statistics is the seventh-highest in the United States.

While billionaires like Oracle's Larry Ellison can purchase an entire island like Lanai for their own personal use, the "undesirables" of Hawaii are relegated like trash to a concentration camp of an island. This is an indication of the future that capitalism holds in store not just for the most destitute of the population, but also for the entire working class. Unable to create jobs and equality or further develop the immense potential of the productive forces, the profit system segregates and compels to squalid living those who no longer serve the interests of the financial oligarchy.

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