

Column: Police officers urge action on homeless, addiction, mentally ill crises

By Malcolm Lutu and Paul Kelly • Today • Updated 12:05 a.m.

Needles. Tents and trash. Vacant eyes and weathered bodies suffering from malnourishment, exposure and a life lived too tragic and too hard. This is the scene in too many of America's cities. A scene that rank-and-file police officers want to end.

We have a homelessness crisis. We have an addiction crisis. We have a mental health crisis. Anyone who tells you that homelessness, addiction and mental health are not related and not the major contributors to this epidemic, has not walked a footbeat with a police officer. We see it first-hand, because our communities send us in to "deal" with these problems. But it's not that simple.

Not every homeless person is a drug addict or mentally ill. But the harsh reality is we have significant amounts of addicts and those who need mental health services who are homeless or who are heading there quickly. They are the hardest to reach and the hardest to serve. A warm bed and a job offer will not stop their slide into a hell no one would ever wish on another human being. They need more. But how?

The Honolulu Police Department is leading the way with its innovative H.E.L.P. program (Health Efficiency Long Term Partnership). This approach teams a police officer with a mental health clinician, a substance abuse counselor and a housing officer. Together, they bring services directly to the homeless.

The team makes contact and assessments, and will even drive someone directly to a shelter if they'll accept the help. Further, HPD operates a Joint Operation Center (JOC) in Chinatown, which is similar to an urgent care center. Clients receive medical attention, mental health services, substance abuse counseling and housing assistance.

The approach is impacting lives, saving money and improving police efficiency. Rather than taking an arrestee with medical issues to the emergency room for a four-hour wait, HPD officers can bring them to the JOC where the arrested is treated and cleared in under an hour.

That's more time for patrol officers on the street.

The JOC also is saving Hawaii's health care system significant money. Homeless clients are getting treated at a system cost of \$400 per visit. While at the ER, the system cost is \$3,000 to \$4,000, and this usually only occurs after smaller health issues have grown more acute.

HPD wants to expand this program even further. It should. The State of Hawaii Organization of Police Officers (SHOPO) and UCOPS, a national coalition of police unions, would like to see a program like H.E.L.P. in all of our cities.

Every community is unique. While we do not need a carbon copy, the all-hands approach, with intensive, immediate services is what all of our communities need. It's an approach rank-and-file police officers, those who work these beats every day, know can work.

H.E.L.P. is not a silver bullet. We still must move past obstructionist groups like the ACLU that try to stop legitimate efforts to keep our communities clean and safe. We need to look at laws that allow medical professionals to intercede when someone who cannot take care of themselves slides toward crisis. We need to admit that not every homeless person is priced out of the housing market or is a struggling veteran.

These are hard truths. However, there is nothing compassionate about allowing someone to die slowly, which is exactly what will happen if we don't take bold action now. Let's save and restore lives by accepting the hard truths about our crises and put our resources where it can have the biggest impact. Your police officers are ready to meet this challenge.

Malcolm Lutu is president of the State of Hawaii Organization of Police Officers (SHOPO); Paul Kelly is president of United Coalition of Public Safety (UCOPS) and heads the San Jose Police Officers' Association.
