

It's shameful that homeless keiki not being given placement priority

By Luanna H. Meyer

Progress in ending homelessness in Hawaii is disappointingly slow.

Meetings of the Hawaii Interagency Council on Homelessness (HICH) have become a metaphor for that lack of progress, but a surprise on the June agenda featured three goals apparently agreed by agencies managing various initiatives to address homelessness:

>> End veteran homelessness in 2015.

>> End chronic homelessness in 2016.

>> And end homelessness for families with children in 2020.

The Council accepted the priorities without deliberation. Surely this process is inappropriate for a representative body appointed by the governor to drive remedies for homelessness in Hawaii. And the order or urgency in these priorities — putting children last — is simply wrong!

We probably agree that our veterans deserve a home after all they have done for their country. Given existing programs, it is probably feasible to end homelessness for veterans in 2015.

But why is ending homelessness by 2016 for chronically homeless individuals a higher priority than homes for families with children who — according to these goals — could wait until 2020?

Many children could spend five more years living “in the rough” in tents, using public toilets, exposed to unsafe environments putting them and their futures at risk.

Remember, five years is one-third of the developmental period of a child, but only 8 percent of the lifespan of a chronically homeless 62-year-old adult. It is unfair, immoral and unbelievably uncaring



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Homeless children played in the street in late June at their homeless encampment in Kakaako next to the Children's Discovery Center.

to continue to justify homelessness for children while we worry about older adults. Or are we just a society of old people who care only about ourselves, while our children suffer with what little is left over after we meet our needs?

This is even more puzzling given that most homeless families with children need only “shallow” supports such as an affordable place to live and a chance to catch up financially.

We have services for individuals with chronic mental health and addiction needs, some of whom refuse treatment and temporary housing but assert the right to instead occupy bus stops and beach parks (with up to 150 vacancies in temporary shelters nightly).

On average, 50 new homeless people arrive in Hawaii each month — 600 new homeless every year. Hawaii has been placing approximately 60 homeless persons into housing monthly, but this may be a revolving door unless initial Housing First funding is renewed indefinitely for chronically homeless indi-



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viduals described by the HICH as unable to contribute to housing costs.

Supported employment could be an alternative as a model that has for decades successfully engaged people with disabilities in meaningful paid work. Why is it acceptable to have low expectations for chronically homeless adults?

Transition housing at Sand Island is planned, but for adults. An additional option for families could be to develop the 80 buildable acres of R-5 residen-

tial zoned state-owned land at Waimano Ridge, grossly underutilized since the 1990s. Environmental and archeological assessments were completed in 2014 toward renovating buildings to relocate state office personnel.

Other vacant structures could be renovated for transition housing, including four vacant dormitories (33,000 square feet). And, with key assessments already completed, building new affordable family housing could be fast-tracked and ready for occupancy, near other residential subdivisions, schools, public facilities, transportation and employment. Sand Island alone will not meet housing needs.

The stated priorities must be revisited and the public invited to contribute, as there are good ideas and people willing to help. It is a national scandal that we allow so many children to spend their lives in poverty.

It will be our very own homegrown scandal if we fail to put homeless children first and give them a chance.