

The Washington Post

Life's a beach for some homeless in Hawaii

By MARK NIESSE
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HONOLULU -- Every morning, Tony Williams wakes to the sound of waves crashing on Hawaii's famed Waikiki beaches and has a spectacular view of the Pacific. But he's not paying a cent for his priceless vista.

Williams is among the growing number of homeless on Oahu taking advantage of inviting beaches and support services in the islands, where they never have to worry about freezing.

But homeless encampments on the beach could damage tourism, officials fear, and they are currently weighing several proposals that they say would help the homeless, while also moving them from public view.

The proposals include offering plane tickets to the mainland, creating a homeless "tent city" on less visible state land and providing more affordable housing in Honolulu, where rents are among the nation's highest.

"If you're going to be homeless anywhere, it's good to be here," said Williams, a 35-year-old tattoo artist from Long Beach, Calif., as he hung his clothes to dry between two palm trees. "I'm dealing with the cards I got dealt. I don't want to stay here forever."

There were 4,171 homeless on the island of

Oahu when a census was taken in January, according to the report released last month, an increase of 15 percent from the same time last year.

"They don't seem to bother people, but it's probably not the image Hawaii wants," said Kathryn Novak, a tourist from Manchester, England, as she prepared to swim off Waikiki. "You'd imagine they'd have their own area, and not so much where the tourists are."

The most contentious of the proposals would use state money to fly the homeless back to wherever they came from, as long as they have family at the destination to take them in. Proponents say the program would cost far less money than what is spent on food stamps and welfare payments.

They weigh a \$300 one-way ticket to the West Coast against what they say is a

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\$35,000 per year cost for each person with services. But, some acknowledge, the scheme could also create problems.

Hawaii's homeless would become another state's problem. It might also provide an incentive for more homeless to travel to Hawaii if they knew they'd get a free ride home.

The idea is being scolded from afar.

"It's basically a callous, 'let's turn our back on the problem' approach to expect other cities to pick up and assume the responsibilities," said John Fox, director of the Seattle Displacement Coalition. "In your community, you're responsible and need to deal with the problem."

Help for the homeless shouldn't end with moving them out of sight, said Connie Mitchell, executive director for the Institute for Human Services, which runs two emergency shelters and offers support services.

"We need to find out what these people need to end their homelessness, not just put them in a place where people can't see them," Mitchell said. "What do these people need to make their lives better?"

Williams is proof that the plane ticket plan could be abused. He took advantage of a similar program in New York City that flew him to Hawaii in the first place after he had

a friend here pose as a family member to take him in.

New York's program, called Project Reconnect, has assisted 18,800 households at a cost of \$218 per person. Five people have returned to Hawaii through the program, according to program officials. Another program in Denver has reunited 45 homeless individuals with their families so far this year, but none were sent to the islands.

Several Hawaii lawmakers want to pass legislation next year to start the \$100,000 plane ticket program.

"A lot of people think it's going to be easy living, but then when they get here, they realize maybe it wasn't such a good idea," said Debbie Kim Morikawa, director for the Honolulu Department of Community Services.

A more immediate solution would set aside "safe-zones" on government land where the

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homeless could camp in tents and have basic sanitary facilities.

Lawmakers are proposing that nonprofit organizations could offer social services in one place and security could be provided - as long as it's away from the tourist beaches.

"It's one thing to get people a place to stay, but we need to improve the quality of their lives," said Darlene Hein of the Waikiki Health Center, which provides homeless outreach. "We worry about it being a magnet, that people will come to Hawaii because there's a campground for them."

The concept of offering affordable housing to the homeless may be the most promising and have the fewest side effects. As with similar programs elsewhere, it's called "housing first." The \$1 million program launched this year aims to get the chronically homeless into their own apartments.

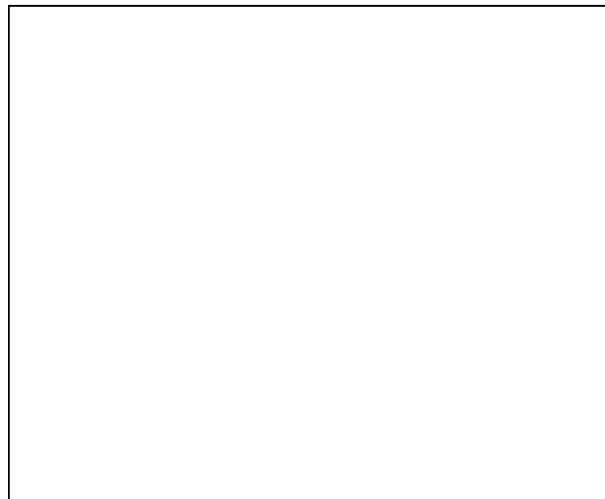
The idea is that a stable housing environment would do more to help people survive on their own.

These plans could begin to make a difference, but long-term solutions including drug and mental health treatment, job training and employment opportunities are also needed, according to service providers.

Despite the beauty and weather, Hector Favela would jump at the opportunity to leave the beach.

"I'm tired of living on the street, getting my stuff stolen and getting beat up," said Favela, 48. "It's not that bad living out here, but it's been too long since I've slept on a bed."

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