

[<< Back](#)HAWAII
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Controversy over call to stop feeding homeless in parks

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HONOLULU (HawaiiNewsNow) - The state's homelessness coordinator is discouraging churches and charitable organizations from delivering meals to the homeless where they live, saying it offers little incentive for them to get into shelters and housing.



"What we found is that those practices are not necessarily helpful when delivered in that way," he told reporters Monday.

But River of Life Mission's general manager Merrie-Susan Marchant thinks it's a bad idea to advise groups against feeding the homeless in parks and on the street.

"It's bad enough to be homeless. Now they want them to be homeless and hungry? These people that come out from the churches, they're trying to help," she said.

"We didn't just go and offer food, then they showed up. They were already there. So our response as a compassionate community is to respond to hungry people," said Rev. Sky St. John of Unity Church of Hawaii.

The governor's 90-day plan to address homelessness encourages churches to feed the homeless at shelters like The Institute for Human Services where they would be exposed to assistance.

"When people come to the shelter for food we're able to also offer them social services, things like housing help, employment help, case management. And that's what really helps them to change their life," IHS community relations director Kate Record said.

Utu Langi began working with homeless during park outreaches. Now he oversees the state's Next Step Shelter and bus shelter programs. He sees value in feeding the homeless in the field.

"I'm just saying that's how I started. And if somebody stopped me back then I wouldn't be doing this now," he said.

Those who favor discouraging street feeding feel it becomes an endless cycle the

homeless come to count on.

"IHS feels really strongly that it's important for people to balance compassion with wisdom," Record said.

But those who feed the homeless in parks fear a bigger problem could arise if their outreaches suddenly stop.

"If we're not compassionate to the least in our community, then we are not compassionate," St. John said.

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