

Aid groups split by call to stop feeding homeless

The governor's appeal is part of a plan to move people to shelters instead

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Bruce Asato

Candis Thomas, left, who regularly prepares food for homeless people, dished out Spanish rice, burritos, salad, bread and a dessert yesterday near Kapiolani Park.

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Some service groups are refusing to heed Gov. Neil Abercrombie's plea to stop feeding Oahu's homeless people in parks and beaches, while others are torn about how to proceed.

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>> Saint Francis School sophomore Kelsea Gines asks Gov. Neil Abercrombie about his plan to discourage feeding Hawaii's homeless people who aren't in shelters.

Bob Erb, chief executive officer of Kingdom of Heaven Ministries, helped serve burritos, Spanish rice, salad and bread in a light, misty rain last night to more than 100 homeless people at Kapiolani Park and vowed to continue serving meals every night despite Abercrombie's concerns.

"The Bible tells me to feed the poor," Erb said. "The Bible to me is more of a law than anything the state creates."

Abercrombie and his homeless coordinator, Marc Alexander, unveiled a 90-day, nine-point plan on Tuesday that, in part, discourages groups from providing food to homeless people — while encouraging the homeless to seek meals and other services at shelters.

The concept bothers the Rev. Sadrian "Brother Sage" Chee of Church of Living Ohana, Family of the Living God, who represents the third generation in his family to feed low-income, senior citizens and homeless people in Chinatown's Aala Park.

"In a crude way, we're being told to starve them to the shelters," Chee said. "The strategy is to lure the homeless closer to where the services are located."

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About a quarter of the 100 people that Chee's church feeds at the downtown park are older people who won't go to a homeless shelter even for just a meal, Chee said.

But the remaining, chronically homeless people "will go where the food is," he said.

Hawaii's largest emergency homeless shelter, the Institute for Human Services, believes that similar food programs make it more difficult for chronically homeless people to seek help, spokeswoman Kate Record said.

"While we recognize the good intent that people have, we've been advocates for not feeding people in the parks," Record said. "We absolutely feel it's enabling them."

Instead, Record said, individuals and groups that want to help should contribute their food and time "through an existing organization that provides opportunities for medical care, case management, housing and employment."

The identical issue is playing out across the mainland, but it is a particularly hard sell in an isolated, island state with a rich history of helping neighbors in need.

Alexander believes that dozens of churches and nonprofit groups feed homeless people across the islands. On Oahu, Aloha United Way provides funding to about 20 agencies that do so, spokeswoman Jody Shiroma Perreira said.

Utu Langi, executive director of Hawaii Helping the Hungry Have Hope, which manages Kakaako's Next Step shelter, understands the concept behind Abercrombie's stance.

But it's still difficult for Langi, who used to serve meals at Ala Moana Park, Waikiki and downtown until 2006.

"That's how I started out, serving food to people who needed it," Langi said. "On the other hand, I understand what the governor is trying to do — divert the efforts to shelters."

Kelsea Gines, a 15-year-old sophomore at Saint Francis School, occasionally gives food and money to homeless people she encounters. In January, she gave a tray of cupcakes and brownies intended for her friend's Sweet 16 birthday party to two homeless men in Waikiki.

Yesterday, as Abercrombie visited her school, Kelsea

asked him, "If part of your plan is that outreach groups are no longer allowed to feed the homeless in parks and beaches, how are we as individuals and communities to help with the homeless problem?"

Abercrombie responded, "You may be giving them food in the sense of sustenance to see them through the day ... but it doesn't change their circumstances. ... Just feeding people and not feeding their souls is actually working against them."

Kelsea understood Abercrombie's explanation. But it won't change her desire to feed the next homeless person she sees.

"He made sense," Kelsea said. "But if I see people around who need help, I'll probably still help them out."

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