



PRESS RELEASE
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 18, 2021

For Information:
Ryan Leong, 808.392.7455
rleong@acluhawaii.org

**ACLU OF HAWAI'I RELEASES REPORT ON
ALTERNATIVES TO CRIMINALIZING HOUSELESSNESS**

A webinar open to the public, presenting and discussing the report, will be held on Monday, November 29, 2021 at 6pm

Honolulu, Hawai'i: The ACLU of Hawai'i released a report today showing that criminalizing houselessness is hurting our communities, and charting a better path forward.

The report, titled "**Decriminalizing Houselessness in Hawai'i**," shows how criminalizing people's status of being unsheltered causes irreparable harm to individuals, wastes public resources, dehumanizes those experiencing houselessness in the eyes of the public, and directly undermines the government's investments in housing and supportive services. As a result, millions of taxpayer dollars are wasted each year on a strategy that is ineffective and damaging. The report shows that criminalizing houselessness also deepens racial and ethnic disparities, disproportionately harming houseless Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders.

Aura Reyes, an O'ahu resident who experienced sweeps while she and her family were houseless, said, "The sweeps are not only disruptive, they are degrading to the people who are targeted as a result of them. They send these people a message that the city believes that they are worthless and considered trash. It also hurts the providers who are trying to build the trust and relationships needed in order to get people off of our streets and into housing."

Lindsay Pacheco, a formerly houseless O'ahu resident who has experienced sweeps in the past and who contributed to the report findings, spends her weekends assisting houseless people who have been affected by sweeps. She helps people navigate the complex processes to secure forms of identification like drivers' licenses and birth certificates, which are often confiscated and discarded by the City during sweeps, making it impossible for many unhoused people to even apply for housing assistance. After many years on the street, Lindsay got housed in May 2020, with the assistance of a Housing First voucher.

Ms. Pacheco reacted to the news that Honolulu administrators are rebranding sweeps as “sanitation efforts” and said, “A sweep is a sweep no matter how you label it, or try to justify it, or how you conduct it. When conducting a ‘sanitation outreach’ how does one determine what is ‘trash’ and what is someone’s belongings, especially when houseless individuals are generally seen as trash in the eyes of society anyway? Treating houseless people like trash on the streets is in no way a solution to houselessness, nor criminalizing us either.”

The findings of the report are based in part on interviews with service providers, government employees, community organizers, academics, philanthropic organizations, and people who have experienced houselessness in Hawai‘i. Some of the topline recommendations resulting from the report include:

- Repeal, defund, and stop enforcing laws that criminalize houselessness;
- Prioritize community-building and cultural change;
- Create mobile crisis response services that are autonomous from police, accessible to the public, and accountable to the community;
- Expand Housing First and wraparound services;
- Grow the inventory of housing that is affordable to extremely low-income residents;
- Strengthen tenant protections; and
- Increase the minimum wage

Report author Asha DuMonthier said, “Houselessness is driven by structural factors - lack of housing that is affordable to low-income people, stagnant wages, and inadequate renter protections and social safety net supports. Yet the primary local government response to houselessness is punitive--using the police to sweep, cite, arrest, and incarcerate unhoused people. This response is ineffective at addressing the root causes of houselessness and does incredible damage to unhoused people’s health and well-being. Why continue with a losing strategy, when public resources could instead be invested in creating safer, healthier, and more equitable communities?”

Looking at these new approaches is essential as it is increasingly clear that what we have been doing in Hawai‘i is not working. Policing costs the counties half a billion dollars a year, with each county spending 16 to 30 times on policing what it does on addressing houselessness.

In fiscal year 2020 the City of Honolulu carried out 1,634 sweeps over the course of 320 days, an average of more than 5 sweeps per day. The ACLU of Hawai‘i estimates that sweeps alone cost Honolulu almost \$5 million per year. Based on that, the county funds used to conduct sweeps in one year could instead be used to fund 192 Housing First vouchers and save taxpayers \$2.2 Million per year in costs related to healthcare, arrests, and incarceration.

Executive Director Joshua Wisch said: “The report we’re releasing today documents what government has done wrong, but also charts a path forward for how taxpayer dollars can be better spent, with positive results, all without dehumanizing and violating the rights of people who are experiencing houselessness.”

Legal Director Wookie Kim said, “In 2016 the ACLU of Hawai‘i successfully sued the City and County of Honolulu over its treatment of houseless people’s property, which the City was seizing and destroying without due process. And on October 20, 2021 the ACLU of Hawai‘i filed suit against Maui County for violations of the constitutional rights of people swept from Kanahā. While we can and will continue to bring such suits to protect peoples’ rights under the state and federal constitutions, we hope that instead government will look carefully at these recommendations as an alternative to criminalizing houselessness.”

The public is also invited to [register for a webinar](#) being hosted by the ACLU of Hawai‘i on Monday, November 29th at 6:00 pm presenting and discussing the Decriminalizing Houselessness in Hawai‘i report. The speakers for the webinar include Asha DuMonthier, Lindsay Pacheco, Wookie Kim, and Shayna Lonoaea-Alexander, a hapa queer community organizer working as a consultant mobilizing for criminal legal policy change through legislative advocacy and political education. This virtual event is free of charge and will include live close-captioning and ASL interpretation.

###

The mission of the Hawai‘i affiliate of the ACLU is to protect the civil liberties contained in the state and federal constitutions through litigation, legislative and public education programs statewide. The ACLU is funded primarily through private donations and offers its services at no cost to the public. The ACLU does not accept any government funds.