



IN THE NEWS

Prompt homeless to get needed help

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By Honolulu Star Advertiser Editorial Staff

The city’s policy of “compassionate disruption” — clearing homeless people and their belongings from public sidewalks — appears to be gaining traction as a routine practice.

Since the city began enforcing a controversial 2014 ban on people from sitting or lying on public sidewalks in Waikiki, the so-called “sit-lie” law has expanded to cover 15 communities islandwide, mostly at the behest of City Council members responding to constituent complaints.

The trend continued this week. On Wednesday, the Council advanced two bills to expand sit-lie even further in areas of Kalihi and Iwilei (Bill 13), and Ala Moana and McCully-Moilili (Bill 20).

Bill 13 would establish a new area of enforcement in Kalihi bordered in part by Dillingham Boulevard, Kohou Street and North King Street. It also encompasses parts of Iwilei, including streets a few steps from, ironically, The Institute for Human Services, which provides shelter and services to the homeless.

Opponents complain that sit-lie enforcement is inhumane, ineffective and possibly unconstitutional — all of which is possible if done incorrectly.

Nonetheless, the reality on the streets shows why carefully targeted use of sit-lie enforcement, while unfortunate, remains necessary. The Iwilei expansion is a case in point.

Kimo Carvalho, director of community relations for IHS, supports Bill 13, and focused on three streets near his facility where homeless people have settled: Iwilei Road, Sumner Street and Kuwili Street.

He noted that of the 120 people IHS approached to offer help, only 11 signed up for intake services and only one person is actively working to get off the streets — a meager outcome after more than a year of outreach work.

Why the lack of interest? It's not for lack of options.

“They're comfortable,” Carvalho said. “They feel this is a safe place for them to be.”

He noted that the area has a lot of drug activity, including meth sales, and prostitution.

Police officers enforcing sit-lie not only can investigate and disrupt this activity; they can provide the homeless with the incentive to get the help necessary to overcome the trauma that put them on the streets in the first place.

“Sit-lie allows HPD to go up to an encampment and direct them to IHS,” Carvalho said. “That's actually what happens first. They don't just go and start citing people.”

True. But eventually, they do.

Police issued nearly 2,800 warnings, about 590 citations and made 12 arrests in Waikiki between September 2014, when sit-lie went into effect, and last week. In Chinatown, where the ordinance went into effect in December 2014, police issued about 19,800 warnings, 300 citations, and made 17 arrests.

Sit-lie enforcement is not an unqualified success, as any observant person can see in many areas of Oahu. But “compassionate disruption” prevents the establishment of large, hardened encampments in areas where they would create a major social and health hazard, as was seen in Kakaako in 2015.

And coupled with outreach and available support services, sit-lie, along with street sweeps and other enforcement tools, have helped prod hundreds of homeless people into temporary and permanent shelter, and to rebuild their lives.

“People have this misunderstanding that (the homeless) are being pushed from neighborhood to neighborhood,” Carvalho said. “That's just not the case.”

The permanent solution, of course, is truly affordable housing on a large scale. Current estimates of tens of thousands of units needed in the next few years seems a daunting, if not impossible, goal. The efforts

currently underway by the city and state, a combination of government housing projects and carrots and sticks for developers, will only make a small dent toward that end. Nonetheless, such efforts, along with expanded treatment centers for substance abuse, need to continue and be given top priority by policymakers and developers alike.

In the meantime, city and state policy must be clear: Living on the streets is not healthy, normal or acceptable.

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