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**EDITORIAL | ISLAND VOICES**

## **Column: Hawaii can no longer ignore Oahu Community Correctional Center problem**

By Max N. Otani and Curt T. Otaguro

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On Jan. 19, the Hawaii Legislature will convene at the state Capitol for the 2022 session. Among the many issues under consideration will be those dealing with the state's criminal justice system, including ongoing efforts to replace the current Oahu Community Correctional Center (OCCC), the state's largest jail.

Since 2016, the Legislature, with the backing of Gov. David Ige, has supported efforts made by the Department of Public Safety (PSD) and the Department of Accounting and General Services (DAGS) to develop a new OCCC by funding the work that led to selection of the Animal Quarantine Station site in Halawa as the location for the new jail.

Our team engaged the Legislature and the community as we prepared the draft and final environmental impact statements in accordance with state regulations and provided updates and reports on utility services, transportation access, and environmental resources, among other topics. With considerable progress achieved, the state's ability to significantly improve how offenders are housed and treated while held at OCCC is within reach.

Over 40 years ago, OCCC was considered a "new generation" facility based on best practices at the time. OCCC no longer aligns with the vision for the future of the justice system that the citizens of Hawaii expect and deserve. The words "antiquated, dilapidated and obsolete" now are commonly used to describe this vital public safety facility.

The current physical design and structure of OCCC present multiple challenges that make it difficult to provide sufficient housing, recreational activities, and quality education and services to offenders.

A NEW OCCC can provide an environment of restoration and rehabilitation.

Fully 95% of the individuals currently incarcerated in Hawaii will eventually return to the community. Therefore, their physical and mental health needs must be addressed, their behavioral issues must be treated, and they must have the skills needed to avoid reoffending and reentering the justice system. We want them to return home better prepared to be successful, productive members of society.

A new OCCC gives us an unprecedented opportunity to provide the type of physical environment and tools needed for the vast majority of offenders to improve their lives.

The redevelopment of the Oahu jail is one important component in the overall effort to reform pretrial policies and procedures that involve not only the executive branch (Department of Public Safety), but the Judiciary and the Legislature, as well. It is based on a better understanding of the varied needs of offenders.

The new OCCC will employ therapeutic rather than punitive practices, in clean and humane living and working conditions, with appropriate spaces for education, counseling and reentry services that emphasize rehabilitation and preparation for offenders to return to the community.

PSD and DAGS want to deliver on that vision for OCCC — a vision held by Gov. Ige, members of the Judiciary and Legislature, justice and health system experts, community advocates, and other stakeholders. Building a new OCCC will go a long way toward demonstrating the state's commitment to addressing the most immediate justice system infrastructure priority.

The long-term cost to Hawaii to continue operating the obsolete OCCC is unsustainable, does a disservice to offenders and staff, and outweighs the cost of building a new facility for a modern era. Continuing to support plans for the new OCCC and funding the next phase is imperative.

Improving Hawaii's criminal justice system, and thereby enhancing public safety, begins by replacing OCCC.

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