

Kawailoa: A Transformative Indigenous Model to End Youth Incarceration

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY - Updated 2024

Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i

KAWAILOA





PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project is a long-term initiative to replace youth incarceration with a Native Hawaiian restorative system that empowers communities, trains youth healers, and shifts resources to community-driven and culturally-grounded sanctuaries of support.

The pipeline to prison, homelessness, and other negative outcomes is a reality for too many Native Hawaiian, Indigenous and other youth of color. The Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i (OYAH) hui will transform a punitive, carceral justice system into a culturally-grounded restorative alternative. As an innovative public-private partnership, OYAH addresses root problems for youth –poverty, trauma, educational marginalization, homelessness, joblessness, sexual exploitation, and family conflict–supporting them to become healers for themselves and others. OYAH's impact includes:

- Replacing a punitive youth incarceration system with one designed for healing, educational, vocational, and preparation for life;
- Elevating evidence-based cultural programs and integrative services;
- Returning agency to Indigenous communities while addressing complex challenges alongside government;
- Establishing a demonstration site for youth leadership and learning exchanges with other communities.

WHY TRANSFORMATION?

As a youth-centered, community sanctuary, OYAH nurtures resilience and leadership among Hawai'i's youth. It is about choosing healing over punishment, changing mindsets and systems, and providing young people, families, and communities with educational and workforce development pathways for self-sufficiency, racial equity, and healthy lives.

OYAH addresses two major issues:

- 1 A harmful punitive juvenile incarceration system that disparately impacts Indigenous and other youth of color;
- 2 A lack of proven alternatives to incarceration that heal rather than harm youth and young adults, especially those most vulnerable to law enforcement entanglement.

Research shows that incarceration does not deter crime, but conversely contributes to systemic racism, inequality, and disenfranchisement. In Hawai'i and other places, Native Hawaiians and other Indigenous peoples are some of the most negatively impacted by incarceration and who experience colonization, poverty, homelessness, and imprisonment in their own homeland. Comprising ~30% of the population, Native Hawaiians make up over 55% of incarcerated youth and receive longer sentences for petty crimes of poverty, while facing substance abuse, trauma, broken relationships, depression, human trafficking, negative health disparities, and economic instability—only worsened by confinement.

Although Hawai'i has reduced numbers of incarcerated minors, serious gaps exist in systems of schooling and care for at-risk/opportunity youth ages 12-24, including young adults who age out of youth services and also risk entering the adult justice system.





COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

OYAH is a community-based initiative committed to our community of stakeholders, staff, youth serving programs/services, with the shared intent to keep youth at the center of our collaborative work. Several organizations were invited to begin innovative work on the Kailua Youth and Family Wellness Center (KYFWC) campus in 2018:

- Residential Youth Services and Empowerment (RYSE) reaches street youth with housing and services to address homelessness (rysehawaii.org).
- Kinai 'Eha engages youth in workforce training and development, partnering with local businesses and volunteers as mentors in trades and community service (kinaieha.org).
- Partners in Development Foundation's Kupa 'Aina Natural Farm offers vocational credits and teaches young people about transforming island food systems (pidf.org).

Each consistently listens to community members to understand emerging and existing issues and shares progress. Vehicles for engagement include social media, employment, volunteers, community council, youth and elder councils, youth transition supports, state-wide involvement with service, faith-based, and cultural groups. Each has made outstanding progress in supporting youth to succeed. Windward Community College and Olomana Youth Center also have expressed commitments to supporting the education and workforce goals of this project.

SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Benefits to Hawai'i



MICRO - Youth:

- Reduced numbers of incarcerated youth in Hawai'i (indicator: HYCF admissions) and eventually, repurposing of the correctional facility.
- Youth demonstrate agency as healers caring for themselves, their families, and communities through mentoring, educational or vocational attainment and workforce development, assessed through qualitative interviews or rubrics capturing change across domains - Na'au (gut), 'Ohana (family relationships), 'Ike (knowledge), Hana (work).



MEZZO - System of care:

- Needs of at-risk or opportunity youth met through integrated, culturally-grounded services with shared vision, communications, data, technology, and achieving positive outcomes among private-public partners (schools, police, clubs, community centers, courts, detention homes).
- Training site: Reciprocal learning and exchange with Indigenous, Oceanic and communities of color, publications, scaling up, replication of successful approaches outside Hawai'i.



MACRO - System level:

- Paradigm shift enacted across system partners— legislative, public safety, courts, counselors, schools.
- Increased support for the research-backed role of community organizations to serve youth, including resources, responsibilities; repurposed former youth correctional facility that expands cultural restorative supports for young adults (ages 14-24).





SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Benefits to society

The profound impacts of colonization and intergenerational trauma among Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are inadequately captured by measures of inequity. This project recognizes the importance of healing from trauma and changing the conditions that perpetuate it. From a Native Hawaiian worldview, racial healing provides the opportunity to live a purposeful, spiritually balanced life that benefits family, community, and 'āina or living land. Racial and Indigenous healing transforms pain into resilience. Through ancestral wisdom guided by aloha (love, compassion), and lōkahi (harmony, balance), youth learn to forgive and be forgiven. By foregrounding Hawaiian ways of knowing and innovation, this project is the antithesis to structural racism and inequity.

Hawai'i is one of the most diverse places on earth, biologically and ethnically, standing at the epicenter of both global extinction and regeneration. Reflecting this diversity, our project provides a platform for Indigenous voices historically omitted from the dominant racial discourse by embracing Indigenous knowledge systems that extend aloha, urging kindness for others and for the natural world in which we coexist. OYAH opens doors to achieving racial equity by returning agency to Indigenous communities in sharing leadership and responsibility alongside government agencies. This is one step forward in a longer journey of interracial reconciliation, political self-determination, and greater community wellbeing.

THE TEAM

Collectively, these dynamic partners, now organized under OYAH at the Kawaihoa Youth and Family Wellness Center, have over 180 years of service experience as providers, cultural stewards, mentors, educators, evaluators, advocates and/or funders. Within two years of securing legislative approval, community leaders and organizations began implementing the 2018 KYFWC plan, under a formal multi-party Memorandum Of Understanding. This project is the next phase in OYAH's implementation, including UCLA and UH experts in juvenile justice, race relations, evaluation, mental health, and planning. Native Hawaiians are playing leading roles in this effort at all levels.

The project is well-positioned for success, representing significant momentum and a rare constellation of expertise to establish the cultural piko (anchor), weave the partners together in an 'aha (cord of strength), redesign institutional connections, and establish a hālau (place of learning) for collective growth.

State Agencies

- Hawai'i Youth Correctional Facility
- First Circuit, State Judiciary
- Hawai'i Family Court

Youth-serving Organizations at Kawaihoa Youth and Family Wellness Center

- Olomana School
- Kahua Ola Hou
- Kinai 'Eha
- Residential Youth Services & Empowerment
- Kupa 'Aina Natural Farm, Partners in Development Foundation

Universities

- University of Hawai'i
- Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Violence Prevention Center
- UCLA Institute of American Cultures

Foundations

- Kamehameha Schools
- Lili'uokalani Trust
- Harry & Jeanette Weinberg Foundation
- W.K.Kellogg Foundation

www.WeAreKawaihoa.org