

pu'uhonua prison program: a new start



When someone leaves prison after serving time, starting over can seem impossible. Without a job, a place to live, or even clothes to wear, the chances of falling back into a life of crime can happen all too easily.

As the director for Native Hawaiian Healing and the Pu'uhonua Prison Program at Waikiki Health, Francine Dudoit-Tagupa has made it her mission to give former inmates the opportunity to start anew. And it's been working.

Since 2016, Auntie Fran and her team of three women have made a difference in the lives of more than 1,600 former inmates, guiding their way to better, healthier lives.

interview Robyn Kuraoka
photos Romeo Collado



Island Scene: How did this program start?

Auntie Fran: It started when an individual contacted me from the Federal Detention Center in Honolulu. He had served 20 years and was being released. He wanted to know how he could get medical care to keep his diabetes under control. Today, I get about one to five letters a day from people in Hawai'i, Arizona, Colorado, and Michigan. These are Hawaiian people saying, "I want to make a difference with my life, I don't want to go back to prison. I need help."

IS: What kinds of services do you provide?

AF: When we started, it was all about trying to get them medical coverage. Now, in addition to that, we help them with replacing legal documents, getting SNAP [the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program] and financial aid, transportation, even gift cards to get clothes. Coming out of prison, most of them do not have anything.

Housing is the No. 1 hurdle that former inmates face, male and female.

For those who can't return to their families or have nowhere to go, we offer a place of refuge at our Next Step Shelter. We pay for their first two months of rent. They can get their bearings, get a job, work with a housing navigator to find affordable housing, and transition back into the community.

IS: You say "we." How big is your team?

AF: We're a team of four strong women — an eligibility specialist, my assistant, a data analyst, and me. When we're in the correctional facilities, we help all. Outside, we have a lot of partners such as the Department of Public Safety, the Hawai'i Paroling Authority, Med-QUEST, halfway houses, clean and sober homes, and transitional homes. Funds from Makiki Christian Church help us with bus passes that are valuable to our men and women being released with no transportation. With a grant from HMSA, we're able to offer a one-year bus voucher. People can go to work, go to the doctor, check in with their parole officer. We get them back on their feet to be productive members of society.

IS: What would happen without this program?

AF: I did not want to see a growing homeless community of former inmates. If we didn't have this, it would go back to the way it was. They would continue getting denied for medical insurance and financial aid and legal documents would be hard to get because it takes money to replace them. Guidance, assistance, and education are important.

IS: How do you measure success?

AF: When we talk with people we've helped, they have jobs, we're seeing more families back together, and our recidivism rate is less than 1%. The fact that they're comfortable enough to stop in and say, "We're doing OK, Auntie," is the best feeling in the world. If we can make a difference in even one life, that makes what we're doing worth it.

For more information on the Pu'u'honua Prison Program, contact Waikiki Health at waikikihc.org or 537-8400 on O'ahu