

Hawai'i Access to Justice Conference  
"Access to Justice and the Time of COVID"  
June 25, 2021

Workshop Summary<sup>1</sup>

**"The Civil and Legal Rights of People Experiencing Homelessness in the Times of COVID"**

Panel Presenters: Mateo Caballero (facilitator), Wookie Kim, Deja Ostrowski, and Janet Kelly

The panelists began the session by deconstructing common misconceptions about homelessness. Unfortunately, on any given day only about 1.79 percent of Oahu's homeless population can access available shelter beds. Accessing resources, an already daunting task for many, was exacerbated by the challenges of the pandemic. While many assume that homelessness "looks" a certain way, the panel stressed the importance of getting to know the individual and recognizing that it is often quite easy to become homeless and extremely difficult to get out.

A consistent theme of this session was the criminalization of homelessness and the substantial barriers it creates for homeless individuals and service providers. Ultimately, our legal system seems to value property over people. Even with a large influx of money due to COVID-19 economic stimulus, very little has gone to direct assistance for the homeless. The most direct way

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<sup>1</sup> This workshop summary was prepared by Nicholas Severson, Staff Attorney, Legal Aid Society of Hawai'i.

to address the issue of homelessness is to provide housing, something we currently do not prioritize as a society.

The group closed by offering suggestions as to how attorneys could help those experiencing homelessness. Direct services, such as assistance obtaining vital documents, is always needed. Advocating to change laws, such as those that criminalize homeless individuals for being in public spaces, would also be beneficial. Finally, simply developing an understanding of the issues those experiencing homelessness face and working to connect individuals to resources within the community is critical.

Though not a new problem, the pandemic has laid bare the shortcomings of our efforts to adequately address homelessness within our community. Advocates within the legal community have a role to play in addressing the myriad issues faced by those experiencing homelessness.