

Hey! Let's Get Organized, Hawai'i!

Will Caron

Hawai'i has always been beautiful. People from around the world have come to love this place. Hawai'i's people have many strengths—things like the humility and compassion we show toward one another; a willingness to extend our sense of 'ohana outward to the community at large; our diversity.

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Hawai'i has never been the paradise in the postcards. People struggle here. Hawai'i has its own collective colonial trauma to work through, lying just below the “melting pot” veneer.

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Both of these statements are true. Together, they show both the opportunity and the need in Hawai'i to create empowered communities. Only empowered communities will overcome the significant challenges we face in the twenty-first century.

Hawai'i needs more community organizers. An organized community is an empowered community. While we wait for a political messiah to rescue us from our struggles, the problems that cause those struggles only become deeper and more damaging. There is no superman. No one is coming to save us; we have to do it ourselves. And we have to do it soon.

Recent data collected by Hawai'i Appleseed Center, the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, KAHEA: The Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance, and the state's own Department of Public Safety show that Hawai'i's people are facing unprecedented struggles that are among the most difficult in the nation.

The median cost of a single-family home on O'ahu has skyrocketed past \$810,000, and our renters pay fifty-five percent more on housing costs than the national average. Yet our wages, when adjusted to the high cost of living here, are also the lowest in the nation.¹

It's no wonder Hawai'i is tied for highest homelessness rate in the country. At 8.9 percent, our “overcrowding” rate is also nearly three times the national average.

Hawai'i has the tenth highest actual poverty rate among the states—at fifteen percent. That represents 210,000 Hawai'i residents who cannot even meet their basic needs. Every year, more than 16,700 Hawai'i seniors are at risk of going

hungry. On a typical school day, nearly 65,000 Hawai'i students depend on free or reduced-price school meals. For many keiki, these are the only nutritious meals that they eat regularly.

Already faced with some of the highest housing costs in the nation, and the lowest wages after accounting for cost of living, families living in poverty in Hawai'i pay the nation's second highest state and local tax rate.

Kānaka Maoli comprise roughly twenty percent of Hawai'i's population, but account for forty percent of the state's incarcerated population (*Native Hawaiian Justice*). Arizona's Saguaro Correctional Facility is forty-eight percent Native Hawaiian alone. Blacks and other Pacific Islanders are similarly overrepresented in the system (*Disparate Treatment*).

Between 1990 and 2017, the number of women incarcerated in the state grew by 265 percent (*Blueprint for Smart Justice*). A staggering seventy-two percent of incarcerated people in Hawai'i are held for non-violent offenses, a class C felony or lower (*Creating*). Hawai'i spends more than \$93,000 per day to house pretrial detainees—people who have not been proven guilty of any crime—at O'ahu Community Correctional Center (*Creating*). Many are there simply because they are too poor to post bail.

Kanaka Maoli communities are also systemically targeted for heavy industrial projects in sectors such as waste management, energy production, transportation, and agrochemical research. These projects often result in elevated rates of health problems such as cancers and diabetes (“Environmental Justice”).

All of that was pre-pandemic. As of May 2020, nearly six in ten (59.2 percent) adults in Hawai'i reported living in households where someone had a loss in employment income since March 13, 2020—the highest rate in the nation. Nearly one-third (32.4 percent) of adults in Hawai'i missed either their rent or mortgage payment in April 2020, the fifth-highest share in the nation.

COVID-19 exacerbated an already decaying socioeconomic system only capable of extracting wealth from its own foundation to feed its bloated top. The pandemic proved how precarious such an exploitative system is.

Advocates have been begging legislators for years (decades in some cases) to address these and other underlying social, economic, environmental, and political problems. We've proposed sound public policy based on clear evidence and data. But legislators—too many of whom are more interested in helping large business entities, investors, wealthy friends, and powerful allies get ahead—have largely been able to ignore us. The few times that legislators have been forced to make changes have only come with tremendous demonstrations of public engagement in a moment that often cannot sustain itself.

Incumbents have, thus far, been unconcerned with organized opposition to their candidacies, confident that the public is largely unaware of what goes on at the state capitol. Advocates have historically lacked the power to unseat these well-funded status-quo candidates who block desperately needed reforms, year after year.

If we want to succeed in creating a new political paradigm that forgoes the pursuit of wealth and consolidated power for the pursuit of justice, equity, sustainability, and self-determination, we must first do the work of organizing a powerful and lasting opposition within the community. Only then can we field and elect candidates that embrace that paradigm.

An organized community will have the power to hold its newly elected leaders accountable. It will be resilient in the face of climate chaos, global pandemics, and geopolitical upheaval. It will be able to adapt and thrive amid the necessary overhaul of our socioeconomic and political systems.

Organizing is like a muscle. Using it strengthens it. People tend to think of organizing in terms of strategy and tactics, but the real heart of organizing is building trust with other people. When the time comes for everyone to execute those tactics, only people who trust one another can act as one. It is through unity that we give ourselves the power to win campaigns.

How do we build trust? We open ourselves up and engage in meaningful communication. We get to know one another. We talk story. This is a strength of ours in Hawai'i. It's also one of the many things that makes Hawai'i worth fighting for. We advocates need to be more aware of the importance of building connections in our communities, and of building trust and buy-in for our policy solutions. We will be far more successful in advocating for policies that promote economic, social, environmental, and political justice if we walk into the Capitol along with an empowered, engaged community.

Every year, more local families are forced to leave because of economic hardship. This trend has led to an overall population decline, but it has disproportionately impacted Kānaka Maoli. Nearly half of all Kānaka now live outside of the Hawaiian archipelago. As *Civil Beat* has documented in its series of letters from the Hawaiian diaspora, to be Hawaiian and to be forced out of Hawai'i—to be separated from one's home—is a continuation of the colonial trauma that still haunts us all.

Despite our problems, Hawai'i is a special place. I grew up privileged and naive. Becoming less ignorant to the harsh realities of life here has not diminished my love for Hawai'i. Quite the contrary. Becoming aware of the injustices around me has strengthened my resolve to do all I can to help build a just, equitable, and sustainable future.

To ensure that Hawai'i is sustained, and can in return continue to sustain us, we need to become effective organizers and to bring the community at large on board with our policy solutions.

Good organizers lead from behind. They facilitate meetings, offer technical expertise, and make connections between allies, but they give the community space to decide for itself which issues matter most, to take the lead in designing campaigns, and to select its own leaders to champion those issues. Good organizers listen.

I have a lot of hope when I look at the *kia‘i* defending Mauna Kea, and other sacred spaces in communities across the state. I have a lot of hope when I look at the work Black organizers are doing across the country to dismantle racist institutions and policies. They’ve proven what can be accomplished when we get organized.

And I have a lot of hope when I look at youth around the world standing up in increasing numbers to demand justice on all fronts. They are learning to use their organizing muscles at incredible speeds and inventing new tactics along the way.

We should do all we can here in Hawai‘i to cultivate and support our own corps of organizers. We must do the important work of building connections in our community. Ultimately, in a struggle against a system of powerful, exploitative, racist policies that perpetuate trauma and suffering on the many to enrich the few, all we have to build power is each other.

Note

1. Unless otherwise noted, all statistics are sourced from Hawai‘i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice.

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