



## ‘Where’s Everybody Going To Go?’

State and city officials are stepping up efforts to solve Hawaii’s homeless crisis. The future of The Harbor is clearly on the table.

NOVEMBER 18, 2015 • BY JESSICA TERRELL

SUBSCRIBE TO READ THE ENTIRE SERIES

**T**winkle Borge, a 46-year-old former meth addict who serves as the unofficial “governor” of Hawaii’s largest homeless community, didn’t recognize Gov. [David Ige](#) until after she gave him a high-five and welcomed him to The Harbor this summer.

“It’s not like I have [Oceanic](#) out here,” Borge says she told Ige apologetically, before taking him on a tour of about 100 tents and patchwork shelters tucked away from public view in the woods next to the Waianae Boat Harbor.

Ige didn’t say much during the tour — or after, according to state Rep. [Jo Jordan](#), who had arranged the visit in the hopes that Ige would be as disturbed as she is that the camp has been allowed to flourish on state land. She wants to see The Harbor cleared out, and the land developed for public use.

At the end of the visit, a member of Ige’s team asked Twinkle: If there was one thing the governor could do for the camp, what would it be?

“Leave us alone,” she replied.





*The entrance to The Harbor lights up at sunset on the Waianae coast.*

For more than a decade, dozens of homeless families and individuals have quietly called The Harbor home, their presence largely tolerated or simply ignored by the public, including the state [Department of Land and Natural Resources](#) which owns the 19-acre parcel.

Now, the property wedged between the Waianae Boat Harbor and [Waianae High School](#) has become the largest homeless encampment in the state. Depending on the time of year, at least 250 people, including dozens of children, and about 100 pets live in The Harbor.

But the tides of public sentiment may now be turning, pushed along by government officials under pressure to finally do something about Hawaii's growing homeless crisis.

## **A Complicated Problem**

In just the past year, Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell and the Honolulu City Council have [worked to clean up the enclaves](#) of tents and tarps that have taken root in urban neighborhoods, many in plain view of Waikiki and the millions of tourists that visit the island. They are unabashedly mindful of the complaints from tourists about the homeless.

City leaders have [passed laws that make it illegal to sit or lie](#) down on sidewalks and benches and in city parks in many areas of urban Honolulu, including Waikiki. They've tried to break up homeless camps through [frequent enforcement efforts](#) that "sweep" hundreds of homeless people out of public spaces. They've begun building new temporary housing units on [Sand Island](#) and have announced plans for a similar [short-term housing project in Waianae](#), not too far from The Harbor.

Many homeless people do finally seek space in a homeless shelter after a sweep, but many others simply find another place to pitch their tents. They can't find a shelter with enough room for their large families and they can't take their pets. A relative few have been placed in permanent housing — the ultimate goal — with the help of social services agencies and city and state programs.





*The homeless encampment near the Hawaii Children's Discovery Center in Kakaako, which was recently cleared by city officials, bore little resemblance to the homeless "village" that is The Harbor.*

In July, the state stepped in. Gov. David Ige organized [a new leadership team on homelessness](#) that includes key state lawmakers, city officials and even Hawaii's congressional delegation. He [hired Scott Morishige](#), a well-respected expert on homelessness, to be his state coordinator.

The city's sweeps continued, now with the blessing of the state, and soon state-owned property in the Kakaako area was targeted for cleanup, too. What had been the state's largest and most entrenched homeless tent city covering several blocks in Kakaako was finally gone in August.

In October, Ige made national headlines when he [declared a state of emergency around homelessness](#), a move that freed up more money for programs but also allowed him to fast-track construction of new homeless facilities by suspending the rules governing procurement and permitting, among other things.

And then Ige announced that the state would soon be turning its attention to homeless encampments that were growing in other parts of Oahu — in Wahiawa, Waimanalo and, yes, Waianae.





*Micronesian families, who had made up a large percentage of urban Honolulu homeless camps, are increasingly moving to The Harbor. This is the entrance to a Micronesian family's compound.*

The news sent a shiver through The Harbor. Many families had taken refuge in The Harbor a few years ago, after Honolulu officials bulldozed a large city beach encampment that had mushroomed farther north. They'd finally settled into a relatively peaceful existence in a community that demanded respect and required people to follow the rules. They've grown used to being left alone.

#### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Aug. 24 In the back of the woods, where the paths wind leading back to the high school parking lot, the dirt is so clean it looks recently swept — like a dirt floor in Mexico that just hasn't been hardened properly.

The rural Waianae Coast is at least an hour's drive from Kakaako, more if you're stuck in Honolulu's famous traffic, and nothing like the highly visible trashed-out eyesore that Kakaako had become. Tourists come to the boat harbor for fishing charters or sightseeing excursions, but hardly any of them venture into the woods next door. There are no bars or high-end restaurants nearby. The nearest movie theater is 30 minutes away.

[Scott Morishige](#), the state homeless coordinator, has worked for years in the nonprofit sector, much of the time for organizations that focus on ending homelessness. He has become known for insisting on finding solutions that are based on data and proven outcomes, not political grandstanding.

Last month, at a meeting at Civil Beat's office, he acknowledged that he had not yet visited The Harbor in his new job. And he'd only just begun talking to the DLNR and local service providers about the future of the unique encampment.

But, he said, state officials would move carefully if and when the time comes to deal with The Harbor.





*Scott Morishige, the state coordinator on homelessness, right, with Gov. David Ige, talk to reporters about the homeless crisis.*

From what he's learned so far through reviewing data collected about people in The Harbor and talking with social service providers, Morishige says it appears a sweep would be counterproductive.

Instead, there needs to be a deeper conversation about "how you create a pathway from The Harbor to homes," he says.

"The approach in Waianae doesn't have to be heavily focused on enforcement," Morishige says. "The goal at the end of the day is to link homeless families to permanent homes."

Still, it's not lost on anyone, including the people who've made The Harbor their home, that they are squatting on public property. It can't last forever.

And Morishige is quick to point out that the "impact on the public space" is also a part of the discussions that are going on about The Harbor.





*The Waianae Boat Harbor next to the homeless camp. Both are on land owned by the state.*

So while Morishige and social services providers say clearing The Harbor would be a mistake without real alternatives in place for the people living there, state Rep. Jo Jordan, whose district includes Waianae, is beginning to push harder for state action to clear the camp.

“I truly think that compassionate disruption is a good tool,” Jordan says, using the controversial phrase made popular by Honolulu Mayor [Kirk Caldwell](#). “If we continue to do the compassionate disruption, maybe something would trigger in the individual to say I’m tired of moving, I’m tired of losing all my personal belongings constantly.”



[WATCH VIDEO](#)

*Screenshot from drone footage of The Harbor.*



Tent cities. Shantytowns. Squatters camps.

Americans often associate images of large makeshift and rundown encampments with the Great Depression, when cities across the United States were dotted with tarpaper-roofed small cities known often as “Hoovervilles,” named after President Herbert Hoover who was blamed for the economic calamity.

But tent cities are very much a reality of present-day America.



*Residents try to keep space around their camp sites. Many are well kept and even have gardens.*

Between 2008 and 2014, the [National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty](#) tracked more than 100 tent cities across the U.S., varying in size from a few dozen people to several hundred.

While large scale homeless encampments may be a relatively unfamiliar phenomenon in some states, Hawaii — with its temperate year-round climate and large homeless population — has a long history of large-scale tent cities and alternative homeless communities.

#### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 2 — Arrive at the camp around 9 a.m. for the monthly meeting. There are about a dozen people gathered, sitting in the shade along the fence in the parking lot across from the camp. Wendell, older guy in maybe his 60s with long white curly hair, says mornings are the worst time for the meetings.

Sand Island, where the city of Honolulu is working to develop a cluster of portable buildings to house the homeless, was the site of a large squatters community until 1980 when the state bulldozed more than 130 homes — most of them belonging to Native Hawaiians.

Just a few years ago, the beaches along the Leeward Coast of Oahu were covered with tents and blue tarps, until a series of homeless sweeps cleared the beaches.

But even before the homeless population along the west side of the island spiked in the mid-2000s there was Makua — a community of mostly Native Hawaiians who lived in tents and shacks on a public beach located halfway between Waianae and Kaena Point.



Activists and filmmakers viewed Makua as a positive refuge for disenfranchised Hawaiians as well as a place for people grappling with homelessness and substance abuse problems. They tried to save it, but the state evicted residents from the beach in 1996.

The most recent large-scale homeless sweep on the Leeward Coast was in 2012, when the city and state evicted more than 200 people from a makeshift beach community. Many of those people ended up in The Harbor, which now has the distinction of being Oahu's largest and longest-running homeless community.

## A Different Kind Of Place

The Harbor lost its biggest protector last December when Ige [replaced William Aila](#) as head of the Department of Land and Natural Resources, the state agency that oversees the land the encampment occupies.



*William Aila is pictured soon after he was confirmed as head of the Department of Land and Natural Resources in 2011.*

Aila grew up in Waianae and served as harbormaster there for two decades. He knows the community well and believes the people of the Leeward Coast are more comfortable with showing aloha to the homeless among them than other neighborhoods might be.

There are two important things to know about Waianae, he says.

"One is people will give you the shirt off their back and any food they have on their table," he says. "Two, if you come to Waianae with a chip on your shoulder, people love to knock that chip off."

The area has one of the highest Native Hawaiian populations in the state, and nearly a quarter of Waianae residents live in poverty. At the start of each month when food stamps come in, the grocery stores are slammed with shoppers who have been counting the days until they can restock empty pantries. Many locals are just one or two paychecks away from pitching a camp in The Harbor themselves.





"I was like oh my goodness, this is where I have to live? But then after that I got used to it."

[Read Charlene's Story](#)

*Charlene and her mother became homeless a few years ago after her grandmother died and they lost their housing.*

Leina Kanana, who oversees the homeless outreach program at the [Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health Center](#), says there's something different about The Harbor than other homeless camps.

There are more families, fewer mainlanders and more Native Hawaiians.

Rose Loke Chung-Lono fits the demographic that social services providers talk about. She is Native Hawaiian and lost her Waianae home after she had a heart attack. She's spent much of the ensuing decade living on Leeward Coast beaches and then in The Harbor.





*The Harbor's location on the edge of the coast makes it an ideal spot for fishing, as some Native Hawaiian cultural practitioners have found.*

Loke, who has emerged as one of the camps leaders, says the residents are bound together by common values, like respecting family. People who don't — or won't — share the same values and go by the rules aren't welcome.

She spends her spare time in The Harbor working on a genealogy of her Native Hawaiian ancestors, and points out that some Hawaiians who live in the Harbor still follow traditional fishing practices.

Hidden from view of most people passing by on the Farrington Highway, The Harbor has managed to stay out of sight, out of mind. Residents make sure they keep the area cleaned up, so there are few complaints about trash or the kind of filth associated with Honolulu's large urban homeless camps.

#### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 14 — Lots of people in the camp are taking advantage of the break in the rain to clean out their camp after the recent storm. The dumpsters are emptied every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Loke stands in the parking lot watching the dumpsters making sure no one else has filled them up, before going back to the camp. She has a lot to get rid of after the rains last week. Loke says she's getting tired of the camp, but she doesn't know what's next. She can't go on like this forever though. She thinks she'll be dead by 70, but what will she do until then? This life is getting old.

Moving people from the beaches and out of sight definitely helped reduce public opposition to the homeless community, [Waianae Coast Neighborhood Board](#) Chair Cedric Gates says.

But that doesn't mean it goes unnoticed.

"The community definitely sees it as an eyesore and a place that kind of brews mischief," Gates says.

What kind of mischief and to what extent is hard to say.

Honolulu police are the first to be called if there is trouble at The Harbor, but police don't track cases and couldn't provide crime statistics or other information specific to The Harbor.

[Honolulu Police Department](#) spokeswoman Michelle Yu said in an email The Harbor's issues are the same as anywhere else in Waianae.





*Honolulu police that patrol the Waianae coast don't keep statistics on crime that might be related to the homeless in The Harbor.*

Yu's perception sounds about right to Ken Koike, a member of the Waianae Coast Neighborhood Board who now has an idea to transform The Harbor into a restored Hawaiian village, where current residents could keep living but visitors could learn about Hawaiian culture.

"Most of the misconceptions are simply because we have been told the people who live here are dangerous," Koike says. "People who actually take the time to come here to see what they can do to help know different."

## **Long Relationships With The Community**

Eugene Muratsuka is exactly who Koike is talking about.

An elderly retiree known as the "saimin man," Muratsuka is the most regular visitor to The Harbor. He comes to the park next door every Saturday at 5:30 p.m. and stays until 10 p.m., when the park closes.

People begin lining up well before he gets there, and they stay until the end. They like his meals, but mostly they like him.

"He's the only real father figure I've ever had," says one woman. "I've only had him for two and a half years though, so he better stick around for a long time."





*Eugene Muratsuka drives out from Pearl City every Saturday to share simple meals with people living in The Harbor like Kalani, right.*

Muratsuka serves simple meals: noodles and broth, crackers and peanut butter. He started feeding people in a park in Honolulu 10 years ago, then he moved to the Leeward Coast where more of the homeless were local families.

Like many who come to The Harbor, Muratsuka is motivated by his Christian commitment to serve others. But unlike many of the church groups that work with homeless in the area, he chooses not to proselytize.

Talking story with people and building relationships is the best way to encourage positive change, he says.

He's gotten to know many of the people in The Harbor as well as anyone can. And he understands where they're coming from. Most people he's met in the last decade have experienced real trauma or loss on their path to The Harbor.

"If you meet homeless and get to know them, you will see that many are in a grieving process," he says.

People in The Harbor may love his saimin, but Muratsuka says the most important thing he serves up every week is his love for them.

As long as he can drive, he says, he will be there every Saturday.

## **Rising Tides Of Opposition**

How much longer there will be people lining up for Eugene Muratsuka's saimin is a big question.

William Aila says voices are rising against The Harbor as Hawaii's homeless crisis becomes more of a public issue that political leaders are being pressured to resolve. The fact there's new leadership at DLNR is also giving critics of The Harbor new life, he says.





*Ken Koike of the Waianae Coast Neighborhood Board has an idea to turn The Harbor into a cultural center. He recently pitched it to Twinkle.*

In October, Koike, the local neighborhood board member, paid a visit to Twinkle's hale. He sat outside with her for hours talking story, focusing on what he calls relationship building — something he says is key to any future plans for The Harbor.

Koike has big, passionate ideas for the place. He envisions a community that could function as both a living space and a cultural center.

Traditional Hawaiian hales could take the place of tents and lopsided shelters. Developing self-sufficient farming practices wouldn't be too hard because people in The Harbor already maintain traditional Hawaiian subsistence practices like fishing, Koike says.

It wouldn't be so much creating a new community as it would be restoring a true Hawaiian Village, he says.





Several camps have installed solar panels to power lights and household appliances.

Koike's not the only one has his eye on The Harbor. And most pitches eventually find their way to Twinkle's Hale.

She says someone from a Hawaiian Civic Club came to The Harbor in October to speak with her about a plan to develop the land in a way that would allow some of The Harbor residents to stay. But she didn't have many concrete details and the [Waianae Hawaiian Civic Club](#) has not responded to a request for comment.

Other community groups, meanwhile, are quietly working on other proposals to transform the land where the encampment sits for public use.

Jordan says she supports a current proposal that would have educational components, but she declined to provide any additional details about who is behind it or what it would entail.

#### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Sept. 25 - I feel the breeze and look at the outline of the mountain and think about my conversation with Ben about being houseless versus being homeless. I thought the term "houseless" was really political when Twinkle told me that was the preferred description around here. But Ben said of course he is not homeless. He is Hawaiian. Hawaii is his home. How could he be homeless, when this land is his home?

This plan would not allow people to live in The Harbor, she says.

DLNR says a group did informally inquire about leasing the land, but no formal proposal has been submitted. Any proposal would have to go before the Board of Land and Natural Resources for approval.

### Cold Shoulder For City's New Shelter

One evening last month, dozens of Waianae residents showed up at a neighborhood board meeting at the local community center to tell city officials that they didn't think much about Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell's idea to build a transitional housing shelter next to a church and across the road from Waianae High School.

Although the new shelter would also be across the highway from The Harbor, few seemed inclined to make that point, or insist that people from The Harbor be cleared out and moved into the new space. Most seemed to have made their peace with The Harbor.

Instead, residents were angry and frustrated that the city would even



consider inserting a homeless facility expected to serve 90 people into their already economically challenged backyard.



*Twinkle Borge, left, attends most Waianae community meetings to make sure people have a way to communicate concerns about The Harbor.*

Why not build a homeless shelter in an affluent area? See how people feel about a shelter in Kailua or Hawaii Kai, they said.

"This community has carried more than its fair share of the state's burdens," one woman told the board, voicing a sentiment echoed by many at the meeting.

Even board members like Koike, who support The Harbor community, stood in opposition to the proposed modular housing development. There's a difference, Koike says, between solutions developed in the community and those imposed upon it by outside forces.





*Rep. Jo Jordan meets with Civil Beat reporters in the park next to The Harbor. She is pushing to clear the camp and use the state land for other purposes.*

Jo Jordan watched her constituents vent their frustrations at the meeting. She said later she was disappointed with some of the negative misconceptions people voiced about the homeless, but she understands their frustration.

Her own desire to see The Harbor cleared doesn't come from a lack of compassion for the homeless, she says. To her, allowing homeless encampments to flourish is a sign of the state's failure to find real solutions.

Jordan is hoping this renewed focus on homelessness in Hawaii can be an opportunity to begin pushing for change in The Harbor.

"It's not tit for tat, Kakaako for our place," Jordan says. "But we need to have that discussion, you know? Is Waianae out of sight, out of mind?"

She says she's long been concerned about health and safety issues in The Harbor. There are no public restrooms nearby open after 10 p.m. No showers. Not much in the way of trash pickup.





*Margaret Bickell created a pantry, kitchen and even a bathroom area in her tent.*

"You can say, 'Jo, OK we can solve that with rolling in some portapotties and a trailer. We can solve that by bringing something like they got in San Francisco where they can shower and bathe,'" Jordan says. "Is the city going to do it or the state going to do it? And how long are you going to do it?"

Ultimately, her biggest issue with the camp is that it's taking up public land.

"What are we doing to protect the public interest on that public piece of property?" Jordan says.

## **Why Not Let The Harbor Stay?**

Politicians and developers may be drawing up plans and scratching their heads over what to do about The Harbor.

But Twinkle Borge and her supporters think the solution is right under their noses. The Harbor has already shown that it works.

So why not let it be a safe zone or an officially sanctioned campground for the homeless?

The Harbor is not a perfect community, Borge says, but it is a community.

"We have our flaws," she told Gov. Ige. "but we do our best."

William Aila thinks The Harbor has demonstrated you don't need a complicated government administration to come in and organize the homeless community. The Harbor has shown the people can do it themselves.

"If you give them clear expectations and you give them minimal help and find the right people to manage, you can come up with a very good program for minimal money," Aila says.





*Tita, who has lived in The Harbor for close to a decade, talks about overcoming her sense of shame for being houseless.*

But homeless experts say what looks like a simple solution may not be so easy in the long run.

A sense of ownership can play a big role in what makes or breaks a tent city or the success of a homeless shelter, Eric Tars, senior attorney at the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty, says.

“In general, ‘organically developed’ tent cities tend to self-regulate out of a sense of shared ownership and community responsibility,” Tars wrote in an email to Civil Beat. “Once a tent city is ‘run’ by a municipality, though, that shared responsibility fades, and it becomes more of a us/them relationship, which doesn’t bode well for success.”

Scott Morishige, the governor’s homeless coordinator, also thinks Hawaii should take a page from the lessons learned on the mainland, where homeless populations are beginning to decline.





"No way in hell I am abandoning him. He's my buddy. My partner. My best friend."

*Ben Susa, 50, has lived in The Harbor since 2007. He'd like to move, but he won't leave without his dog Spice.*

The idea of safe zones or campgrounds for homeless has been suggested by a number of people, he says.

But providing security and infrastructure like toilets and showers can actually be quite expensive, Morishige says.

And the biggest argument against the live-and-let-live concept is that there is no focus on providing support for people who want to transition to permanent housing.

#### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

Oct. 3 — Back out in the park, the tennis courts are brightly lit. A few cars in the boat harbor parking lot are bumping music. Hip hop. Pop. The lot near

Safe zones also don't fix what the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty finds to be the biggest contributing factor to the rise of tent cities: A lack of affordable housing.

The wait list for state-run affordable housing in Hawaii is two to five years, and no pets are allowed in the units — a barrier for many in the camp.

While tent cities — when built by the homeless themselves with a self



the tennis courts is starting to empty, but the saimin man is still there. A small group of children from the a micronesia family runs around on the tennis courts. Adam and Twinkle take a shower by the trash bin after a long day of hiking. The street lights in the parking lot give off a soft yellow glow. A few people from the camp sit on the stoop of the Spinner Cafe.

governance structure — can provide an important sense of security and community for people not served by the shelter system, they should only be a temporary solution, the NLCHP says.

A 2014 NLCHP report warns that tearing down established homeless communities without providing adequate solutions for the people who've lived there can be incredibly destructive.

That's a position that Morishige shares.

"Because of the organized structure of The Boat Harbor, the service providers feel a sweep would be very disruptive," Morishige he told Civil Beat.

State Sen. Maile Shimabukuro represents the district that includes The Harbor. She is not as set on having it removed as Jordan, her House counterpart.



*Sen. Maile Shimabukuro, center, during a legislative hearing earlier this year.*

Shimabukuro would like to see alternative housing solutions put in place, where people would be more comfortable and autonomous. She'd like to see the rules changed for Hawaiian Home Lands — acreage set aside for Native Hawaiians — to allow people to camp on their land while they build perhaps smaller off-grid structures.

There are many in The Harbor who feel more comfortable being outdoors than being forced into a shelter, Shimabukuro points out.

Legalizing trailer parks in Hawaii is another possible solution, she says. And she's not opposed to exploring the idea of campgrounds.

"Hopefully there can be some solution that suits this population," Shimabukuro says. "What we've been doing so far isn't quite the right fit for them."



Given the governor's new focus on homelessness, it's a safe bet that the kinds of solutions Shimabukuro is seeking will be on the table sooner rather than later.



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

*The Harbor offers spectacular scenery for those who make it their home.*

And the hidden refuge that is The Harbor will become a very different place.

Gone will be the shelter that Shina Gonzalez took two years to build, the coral walls that residents so carefully constructed. The papaya plants that Ben Susa hauls water for each day will wilt away. So will Jay's pineapple bushes and Margaret Bickell's cactus and rock garden. The fences that residents pieced together from pieces of wood pallets. The well-tended dirt paths. The testaments to a community trying to save itself will go the way of other homeless encampments.

"Honestly, I'm surprised we are still there," Twinkle Borge says. "I thought they would have come in a long time ago to do a sweep. But in reality, where's everyone going to go?"

**Editor's Note:** *Some people in this series would speak with us only if we did not identify them by their full names. Some would only agree to be photographed in shadow or at a distance.*





[WATCH SLIDESHOW](#)

*View the unique way that people have constructed their homes and campsites in The Harbor.*



[Show Comments](#)

### About the Author



CIVIL BEAT STAFF

**Jessica Terrell**

Jessica Terrell is a reporter for Civil Beat. You can reach her by email at [jterrell@civilbeat.com](mailto:jterrell@civilbeat.com).

**Use the RSS feed to subscribe to Jessica Terrell's posts today**