

It's Time to Own Our Future

By Christian Fern, Liz Ho, and Wilbert Holck

In trying times, it's tempting to cut government spending. But eliminating or curtailing essential services has devastating impacts on the public. It may seem counterintuitive, but this is the time to invest in services that support the community to accelerate economic recovery.

Most of us have not lived through a pandemic before, but this isn't our first experience with a recession. We know what works for economic recovery. We've also learned — the hard way — what doesn't work.

It's easy to forget that throughout the pandemic, dedicated people in the public sector — members of the Hawaii Fire Fighters Association, Hawaii Government Employees Association, Hawaii State Teachers Association, State of Hawaii Organization of Police Officers, University of Hawaii Professional Assembly, and United Public Workers — have been providing critical services to keep our state functioning. These same people will be key to our state's economic recovery. It would be a grievous misstep to furlough or lay off the very people who provide the services that will lift us out of economic despair.

Unfortunately, some may hold negative views of the public sector. Their argument is simplistic: "The state has a budget shortfall of \$1.4 billion. The solution is to cut government jobs and eliminate programs."

This false, perverse notion of shared suffering will not make things better. Clearly, self-centered, crabs-in-the-bucket thinking will not move Hawaii toward economic recovery. Government spending, jobs and the services provided have historically pulled our country and states out of the worst recessions and depressions.

Sadly, government employees have been portrayed as entitled. Fortunately, there are legislators who have not bought the artificial demarcations between private-sector and public-sector employees and are looking at the greater good.

We can learn from the ill-conceived furloughs and budget cuts imposed by past administrations. Those bad decisions still haunt us today. This time we must be more circumspect and confront the hard questions:

- Do we cut spending in public health during our ongoing battle with the pandemic?
- Do we curtail allocations for human services when enrollment in Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) have become even more vital safety net government programs to escape the clutches of our ailing economy?
- Do we forgo inspections for invasive species and enforcement of natural conservation efforts that can permanently alter our precious ecosystem?
- When many have turned to outdoor recreation to alleviate the stress of this pandemic, is it best to cut back on care and maintenance of our public parks and recreational facilities?

- Do we fire teachers and educational assistants when we already have a teacher shortage?
- Do we cut funding for higher education, making students unable to meet graduation requirements and hinder their job prospects? Are we willing to jeopardize hundreds of millions of dollars in non-state funding for university-level research that creates jobs and learning opportunities for students?
- Do we dismantle the systems in place to protect the public from COVID-19 scams?
- Do we eliminate social services provided by government agencies when emotional stress is at an all-time high? If we follow the small-minded line of thinking, should the nonprofit sector also share in the pain?

In the absence of strong, visionary leadership, the public-sector unions have been at the forefront of advocating for a better future. We have an opportunity to define Hawaii's future. How we invest — or don't invest — will determine the future we create for ourselves and future generations. It's time to stop tearing each other down, own our future, and begin to work together.

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