

West Hawaii Today

Two years after closing, Kulani prison may reopen

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HILO -- Closed nearly two years ago to save money, Hawaii Island's former prison could be reopened to house up to 200 inmates now incarcerated on the mainland.

Gov. Neil Abercrombie is considering whether to use the old Kulani Correctional Facility in his plan to reduce the number of prisoners Hawaii has sent out of state, Abercrombie spokeswoman Donalyn Dela Cruz said Friday.

"Kulani ... is definitely, from what I understand, being considered to be reopened," Dela Cruz said.

In June, Abercrombie announced a criminal justice plan that involves expanding prison space to accommodate some of the one-third of Hawaii's inmates now serving time in mainland prisons.

"It has not been determined just yet exactly how Kulani will play or when we will reopen," Dela Cruz said. "It definitely is being looked at as we look at the long-term goal of returning our inmates home."

Located at the end of Stainback Highway 20 miles south of Hilo, the Kulani facility was opened in 1946 as a work camp and later converted into a minimum-security prison. The last of its 123 male inmates, many of them sexual offenders, were transferred to other Hawaii prisons in September 2009.

Last November, the 614-acre prison property was put under state Department of Defense control for use as a training camp for at-risk teens. The camp, called the Hawaii National Guard's Youth Challenge Academy -- Kulani, graduated its first 41-member class in June.

The decision to close Kulani was made in mid-2009 by then-Gov. Linda Lingle as the state faced a \$786 million deficit.

Shuttering Kulani will save taxpayers \$2.8 million of the \$6 million annual cost to run the prison, then-Public Safety Director Clayton Frank said in making the formal announcement during a July 2009 press conference held in Honolulu.

Lingle's term has since ended, and the Republican governor has been replaced by Abercrombie, a Democrat. Abercrombie appointed a new prison director who favors returning prisoners to Kulani.

"By reopening KCF, PSD (Public Safety Department) will be able to provide for the custodial care and program needs such as vocational training, treatment modalities, and educational services," Public Safety Director Jodie Maesaka-Hirata told a state Senate committee in March. "KCF would provide PSD the ability to return upwards of 200 inmates from Arizona."

Maesaka-Hirata's testimony was in support of a Senate resolution disapproving of the land transfer to the DOD, urging the Public Safety Department to reopen the prison, and asking the DOD to move its youth camp to another Big Island location.

The decision to close Kulani was "ill-advised" and resulted in Hawaii investing in mainland states, Jeanne Ohta, executive director of the Drug Policy Forum of Hawaii, said in her testimony before the Senate Committee on Public Safety, Government Operations, and Military Affairs.

"Kulani was also the largest sex offender treatment program in Hawaii and the most successful offender treatment program in the nation, with less than a 2 percent recidivism rate since 1988," Ohta said during the March meeting. "Why close such a successful facility?"

Endorsed by all three Big Island senators, the nonbinding resolution advanced unanimously out of two Senate committees, but failed to generate a hearing in the House.

"I think there's a chance that it could be reopened," Sen. Josh Green, D-Kona-Kohala, said Friday.

Mainland for-profit prison operators tend to cut corners by spending fewer resources on needy medical, alcohol and drug treatment programs, said Green, a practicing doctor.

"I personally have a feeling that a society should address its problems locally," he said. "The idea that we're sending prisoners to the mainland never sat well we me."

A member of Abercrombie's newly created Justice Reinvestment Commission tasked with examining Hawaii's prison system, Green said Kulani served the community well. If more prison beds are needed, it's better to have them here, he added.

Talk of reopening the prison has left the Youth ChalleNGe Academy's Big Island operation with an uncertain future, statewide program Director Rick Campbell said following the June 27 graduation ceremony for its inaugural class.

It's possible the academy could be moved to the recently renovated Keaukaha Military Reservation located across the street from Hilo International Airport, he said.

Campbell could not be reached Friday for follow-up comments.

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