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Social issues must be new governor's top priority

Our View

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Staff Pacific Business News

The candidates for governor of Hawaii all say they can best provide the necessary leadership to guide the state toward a bright and prosperous future.

Let's see how they plan to deal with the social issues described by eight nonprofit executives who met with the PBN news team last week.

We have the highest cost of living in the nation. That's no surprise — it's called the Price of Paradise — but the numbers are staggering among those living below the poverty level. Consider these statistics compiled by [Victor Geminiani](#), executive director of the Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice:

- One of every six Hawaii residents (17 percent) is living in poverty.
- More than half (55 percent) of renter households pay more than 30 percent of their income for shelter. More than four of five living in poverty (86 percent) pay more than half of their income for shelter. Until recently, we have seen no real attempts to build affordable rental units for the past four decades.
- Hawaii has the nation's lowest wages when adjusted for cost of living and taxes. This problem is not limited to low-income households. Hospitals and law firms are having trouble attracting doctors and attorneys who can live much more comfortably on the Mainland.
- The state's 4 percent General Excise Tax is the most regressive tax possible, Geminiani says, because it hits low-income households especially hard. Unlike sales taxes in other states, it does not exempt food and medicines. In addition, Oahu consumers are paying an extra half-percent to help pay for the \$5.16 billion rail mass-transit system.

No wonder we have a homeless problem, which is much larger and more serious than it appears.

We all have seen or read about the homeless who camp out on our sidewalks and in our parks — many of them in need of mental health treatment and others just scamming the system. But

we pay little attention to the thousands of “invisible” homeless who are victims of our economic systems. Half of our adult homeless have jobs, and 80 percent of them have lived in Hawaii at least 10 years. Two out of five are keiki.

They survive because of the work of social service agencies, which themselves are under severe economic pressure. Poverty and homelessness breed social problems such as domestic abuse. Low-income families are less likely to afford preschool education for their children, which creates eventual disparities in the classroom and more pressure on the public school system.

Then there is Hawaii’s aging population, the baby boomers who will need more health care and social services as they move out of the work force and into retirement. [Jerry Rauckhorst](#), president and CEO of Catholic Charities Hawaii, sees a potential crisis that could make the homeless problem seem small by comparison.

The good news is that most of our social problems can be solved, but they will require financial resources and a communitywide effort that involves the business community. They will require dramatic changes in the way we approach social issues — a sharper focus on prevention, for example.

Some members of the business community are involved. [Banks](#), for example, provide counseling in financial literacy, and some Waikiki hotels offer career counseling. But the potential for business support is much greater.

Solving our social problems — and, equally important, preventing new ones from happening — will require a coming together of our business, nonprofit, government and political sectors and a willingness to change the way we tax and spend. It will require a leader with a bully pulpit and connections to all four sectors, someone with vision who can build consensus.

Sounds like a job for Hawaii’s next governor.

Closer look

Read more about what eight of Hawaii’s top nonprofit executives have to say in PBN’s Oct. 10 print edition.