

No home in Waikiki

Sidewalks are emptier due to the sit-lie ban, but where the homeless have gone is unclear

By [Gordon Y.K. Pang](#)

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Oct 12, 2014

LAST UPDATED: 02:56 a.m. HST, Oct 12, 2014

Since police started enforcing a ban on lying and sitting on Waikiki's public sidewalks, the estimated number of homeless individuals in the area has dropped, marking a noticeable change in what had become an unwelcome part of the fabric of the state's largest tourist district.

A key police official estimates that the overall number of people lying or sitting on public sidewalks in Waikiki has dropped about 50 percent to 60 percent.

But where those people have gone, and whether the "sit-lie" ban should apply elsewhere on the island, remain hot topics of discussion at Honolulu Hale and throughout Oahu.

The one place there has been a clear uptick in the homeless population is on Fort DeRussy Beach, where the city lacked jurisdiction to enforce the new ordinance. City officials estimate that between 20 and 36 of the street people who had lived on Waikiki's sidewalks have relocated to that beach area.

A loophole that prevented enforcement of the ordinance at Fort DeRussy Beach was closed on Friday when the state Board of Land and Natural Resources voted unanimously to give regulatory authority over the site to the city.

Aside from the migration to DeRussy, just under a month after Mayor Kirk Caldwell signed the bill, there's largely only anecdotal and often conflicting information about where the street people may have gone. Acting Maj. Lisa Mann, who heads the Honolulu Police Department's Waikiki patrol district, said the matter is difficult to pinpoint.

For instance, there does not appear to be a noticeable increase of homeless people congregating along the outskirts of Waikiki in places such as Kapiolani Park or the Paki Avenue area. "We have always had people on the outskirts," she said. "There does not appear to be an increase."

Mann said in an email that 15 citations and 277 warnings were issued for violations of the Waikiki sit-lie ordinance from Sept. 26 to Oct. 8. Caldwell signed the bill Sept. 16, and officers spent the first 10 days educating the public, Mann said.

Earlier this year, city officials estimated that of about 560 chronically homeless living on Oahu, about 30 percent were in Waikiki. Some said they chose Waikiki because that's where there is the most foot traffic, allowing for better panhandling opportunities.

Meanwhile, reports have surfaced that the number of homeless who spend the night in the Honolulu Airport area has increased.

But state Department of Transportation spokeswoman Caroline Sluyter said airport officials have not seen a detectable increase in recent weeks. Between 30 and 40 people, attracted largely by a facility that's clean, well-lit, generally safe and is open 24 hours a day, have maintained a steady presence at the airport long before the sit-lie bill took effect, and that population has not changed, she said.

Most of the airport-based street people hang out late at night on benches on the front side of the international terminal, departure level, Sluyter said. The department "brought special service providers out to reach out to the homeless and let them know what services are available to them," she said.

Ron Lockwood, chairman of the McCully-Moiliili Neighborhood Board, said there appears to be an increase of homeless camped out along different sections of his board's jurisdiction.

He said the establishment of a Waikiki Health Center medical and dental health clinic on Makahiki Way, across the street from the McCully-Moiliili Library and next to Honolulu Stadium Park, has attracted more homeless individuals, who camp along the sidewalks in the area.

Lockwood said the homeless are now more apt to stay along side streets to avoid harassment from law enforcement. "They're staying out of sight," he said.

Larry Hurst, chairman of the Ala Moana-Kakaako Neighborhood Board, said he's seen no noticeable increase in the homeless population in recent weeks in the neighborhoods he serves.

In the Chinatown area, Jeff Mull, whose wife owns a boutique store in the district, said he doesn't know if any street people in the area's current count are there as a direct result of the Waikiki sit-lie ordinance. But, Mull said, "it seems that many of the new faces we saw in Chinatown aren't as present as they were a few weeks back."

Mull said what he is certain about is that throngs of homeless people in the neighborhood have discouraged potential Chinatown shoppers.

"I'm certain that if they weren't allowed to lay on the sidewalk in front of our stores, we would attract more customers," he said.

Concerns echoing Mull's helped prompt Honolulu City Councilman Ron Menor to introduce Bill 48, which is aimed at expanding the sit-lie ban to sidewalks in business zones across the island, but only from 5 a.m. to 11 p.m. daily. However, a decision made by a number of other Council members to tack on additional areas of the island where the ban would apply has raised strong constitutional issues from city lawyers and Menor, himself an attorney.

The bill, which had been slated for final reading before the full Council last week, was pulled back at Menor's request.

It is questionable whether some of the areas added to the proposed measure could pass constitutional muster in the assertion that people lying or sitting on public sidewalks are impeding pedestrian traffic or hindering businesses, Menor said, and those areas should be removed from the bill before it advances.

Councilman Ikaika Anderson, who chairs the Zoning and Planning Committee, said he intends to work with Menor and other city officials to iron out the kinks and move out the bill when the committee meets Thursday.

The Council will take up homelessness issues twice this week.

On Monday, Mayor Kirk Caldwell's administration is expected to update the Intergovernmental Affairs and Human Services Committee on its Housing First program, including last week's selection of the Institute for Human Services to oversee its Housing First program to provide permanent housing for those deemed chronically homeless.

The city last week named the Iwilei-based homeless organization as the winning bidder for a \$3 million proposal to set up the first Housing First project. City officials declined to provide specifics, pending a 10-day period for the contract to be completed. IHS officials could not be reached for comment.

The Council has approved \$47 million for Housing First and other homelessness programs. Housing First is based on the idea that placing chronically homeless into permanent housing should take priority over other issues the individuals may be facing.

Some homeless advocates believe the city should focus on the Housing First initiatives and discard with the sit-lie enforcement efforts altogether.

Jenny Lee, a staff attorney for the Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice, said the city should aim to provide permanent housing for those in need, and not criminalize homelessness. Lee said she's seen an uptick in homeless along sidewalks in both McCully and downtown Honolulu. "People are scattering and they're very afraid," Lee said.

Jason Espero, director of the Waikiki Health Center's outreach Caravan program, agreed.

"Really, what's going to happen now is that people are going to keep moving into areas where they're not going to get cited," he said. "It's not really solving the problem, it's just moving people from neighborhood to neighborhood and making it more challenging for people to live."

560: The estimated number of chronically homeless living on Oahu, according to city officials

15: Citations issued for violations of the Waikiki sit-lie ordinance from Sept. 26 to Oct. 8

277: Warnings issued in the same time period