

## ISLAND VOICES

# Major investment needed for housing

By Connie Mitchell  
and Brandee Menino

**A** place to call home. A place from which family and community can grow and thrive. For many Hawaii households, a decent, affordable place to live is out of reach. The strength and health of Hawaii's people and communities depend on all of us coming together to turn around a problem that's been growing for decades.

In 1970, the state of Hawaii declared a "housing crisis" here. Year after year it's gotten worse. Increases in housing costs have outpaced increases in wages. More and more families are unable to afford housing and still have enough left for food and basic necessities.

Turning around a housing and homelessness crisis that's been growing for 50 years will be difficult, but not impossible. It will require coming together around a shared vision, taking bold action, and using data-driven approaches to efficiently use resources. It will take persistence, commitment and time.

Years ago, a family facing homelessness would arrive at service provider's door and receive whatever the provider had to offer whether or not it was the best suited service for the situation. Or the family might be sent away with only a list of other providers and a prayer that one of them could help.

Today, regardless of which provider's door they knock on, families are assessed and matched with the services and providers that can best address their particular situation. This more-connected, efficient and effective system is a result of the work of Partners in Care (PIC), Bridging the Gap (BTG) and the Hawaii Inter-agency Council on Homelessness (HICH) — groups that consists of nearly 100 homelessness stakehold-



Connie Mitchell, left, chairs Partners in Care (Oahu); Brandee Menino chairs Bridging the Gap (Hawaii island, Maui and Kauai).

ers including service providers; health care organizations; federal, state, and county government leaders; and business leaders.

Efficiency is critical, but even the most efficient system cannot address a problem of this magnitude without sufficient resources. Last year, legislators made a bold and unprecedented commitment of \$200 million for truly affordable housing and \$50 million for resources to address homelessness — nearly seven times the amounts committed from the year before.

To turn around a problem that's been growing for 50 years, this level of investment needs to become the

new normal. Recognizing this, PIC and BTG have adopted a comprehensive proposal to address homelessness, also supported by HICH:

>> Sustained annual commitments for truly affordable housing, including targeted housing for the chronic homelessness. We estimate, for example, that annual commitments of \$200 million, including \$75 million toward chronic homelessness, would save the state more than \$2 billion over 10 years, primarily due to reduced medical and related emergency services costs.

>> Sustained annual commitments for core homelessness services that work — such as Housing First — but which have previously been funded on a year-to-year basis, hindering the long-term planning necessary to efficiently run programs; historically stable funding for other core services such as temporary housing needs to remain in place.

>> Funding to test new programs that would fill gaps in existing services, such as a program for kupuna facing eviction because their fixed incomes haven't increased with rapidly rising rents.

>> Changes to mental health laws to ensure that people incapacitated by mental illness and suffering on the streets are connected with the help they need.

Hawaii's housing and homelessness problem has grown to the point that it threatens not only those living in homelessness or teetering on its brink; it affects us all. By coming together around a shared vision and by seeking out the necessary resources, we are gaining ground on addressing homelessness.

We hope more of our community will join us — share your knowledge, skills and resources — in refining the vision and improving our systems so our communities have a stable foundation on which to build and thrive.

