



Hawaii dimmed by education, election, health cuts

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A homeless man who wished not identify himself naps under his blanket at Kapiolani Park Friday Dec. 18, 2009. Due to the bad economy the Oahu homeless population has grown. Many now camp at Kapiolani Park which is in the shadow of Diamond Head and Oahu's main tourist destination Waikiki Beach. (AP Photo/Eugene Tanner)

By MARK NIESSE

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HONOLULU (AP) - Hawaii public schools are closed most Fridays, rats scurry across bananas in uninspected stores and there may not be enough money to run the next election.

About the only parts of the state untouched by the foul economy are its sparkling beaches and world-class surfing. Hawaii's money troubles are creating a society more befitting a tropical backwater than a state celebrating its 50th anniversary and preparing to welcome President Barack Obama home for Christmas this week.

"There is community energy and outrage building up," said James Koshiba, a co-founder of the activist organization and Web site Kanu Hawaii, speaking about the cuts to education. "The people have to play a bigger role. Folks won't forget how this unfolds come election time."

_ Hawaii now has the shortest school year in the nation after the state and teachers union agreed to shutter schools for 17 days a year, leaving 171,000 students without class on most Fridays. Negotiations to reopen them collapsed last week.

_ Food establishments often go uninspected, a fact highlighted by an Internet video showing rats roaming freely across produce in a Honolulu Chinatown market. The state has just nine health inspectors on Oahu to handle nearly 6,000 markets and restaurants.

_ The state Elections Office said it may not be able to afford a pending special election, which would leave half of the state's population without representation in the U.S. House of Representatives until September 2010.

_ Homelessness is on the rise as mental health, child abuse, welfare and daycare programs run short on cash. And next year may be even worse because tax revenues continue to plunge with the economy.

Hawaii is far from alone in cutting the size of government during the global financial downturn, with nearly every state resorting to across-the-board cuts, furloughs or layoffs to make ends meet. This tiny state of 1.3 million residents faces a projected \$1 billion budget deficit through June 2011.

But Hawaii stands apart in how its government shrinkage has ripped into what are generally considered to be core functions: education, public health, elections and services for the disadvantaged.

Gov. Linda Lingle warned that government would not look the same after she ordered most departments to slash their budgets by about 14 percent.

"Government is not going to be able to provide the array of services at the level that we used to because we have billions of dollars less," the Republican governor said earlier this month. "We need to be creative and we need to be realistic. We can't be in a state of denial about the reduction in revenues that we have."

Among the worst-off states nationwide are California, Nevada, Arizona, Florida and Michigan because of the collapse of the housing market and struggles in the auto industry, said Arturo Perez, a fiscal analyst for the National Conference of State Legislatures.

The organization listed Hawaii, despite having largely withstood the housing market collapse, as one of 13 states with a pessimistic budget outlook for the current fiscal year, and it's projected to have the second-largest shortfall, percentage-wise, in the 2012 fiscal year, at 28.8 percent, behind only Arizona at 30 percent.

"What we hear over and over from the states is that everything is on the table," Perez said. "When you see K-12 education being cut, which is often among the most popular programs, that speaks volumes about the tough choices the states are having to make."

Honolulu's shortage of health inspectors isn't new, but the cuts now call for the elimination of the Health Department's vector control unit, which helps homeowners and businesses eradicate rodent, mosquito, fly and other pest problems.

"This is not good government," said Larry Geller, the Internet blogger and political watchdog who posted the rat video. "Other states are struggling with the same problems, and many of them are making difficult decisions. But Hawaii ... I think the choices have been poorly made."

As for the pending election, Hawaii's elections chief said his office doesn't have enough money to run either a regular or all-mail vote. A special election will be needed because U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie plans to resign in the next few weeks to run for governor, leaving a vacancy in Congress. If money can't be found, that spot may not be filled until the regularly scheduled primary election.

Meanwhile, services to poor and disadvantaged populations are dropping off when they are most needed, said Alex Santiago, executive director of PHOCUSED, a consortium of nonprofits.

Unemployment, food stamp applications, poverty rates and domestic violence are on the rise, according to a recently released study by his organization.

The homeless who camp in tents along a stretch of Waikiki beaches are giving tourists from around the world a glimpse of the financial and social problems that Hawaii is facing. But many homeless families have been forced out far west to the Waianae Coast.

"The homeless situation is right in your face. Almost everywhere you go now you see people who are absolutely devastated and have nowhere else to turn," Santiago said. "We've allowed our responsibilities to slip."

Limits imposed on the amount of time mental health patients can get help from specialists will lead to more relapses, crime and hospitalizations, said Poka Laenui, executive director for Hale Naau Pono, the largest provider of community health services on Oahu's Waianae Coast.

"Half of the problem is a financial problem," he said. "But there's another problem, and that's a lack of leadership. It's not leadership when you get out a calculator and take across-the-board reductions in services. Leadership is looking at specific programs and setting appropriate priorities."

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