With its tropical beach side views and year round warm climate, Hawai‘i seems like the ideal location to set up tent when the expense of a home is out of reach. Hawaii’s reputation as a place of sun and relaxation is a catalyst for the growing number of homeless that are afflicting the state of Hawai‘i. Although an exact number is hard to come by, the number in circulation from a “point in time survey” conducted annually by the state, at present sits at around 6,000 with up to 15,000 people falling into homelessness at any one point during a given year. The statistics are shocking and triggering necessary concern and action within the local public and business communities of Hawai‘i. With the high-status APEC summit being held here in Honolulu only months away, state departments and local organizations are on the move to alleviate and ultimately eradicate the widespread problem, and are confident of success.

Homelessness is a complicated matter and there is no quick fix. Merely sweeping people from one place to another gives no solution or relief to those suffering in poverty. The masses residing on the streets of Hawai‘i have the same rights as any other individual within the United States; therefore the homeless cannot simply be herded off to a designated location, as spoken to as a possible resolution, without having consent. The victims of homelessness are often in shocking health both physically or mentally, and are unaware of what is in their best interests. Poor health condition creates difficulty for those trying to assist the homeless population as many are unwilling to accept help in any form. The New York times quotes Sherri Watson, a 43 year old woman living on the streets of Honolulu as saying; “I love it: free rent, free electricity, Who wants to stay in a bedbugged shelter?” There are shelters and other places for the homeless to go to receive support and assistance, but they must want to go there, there is no forcing allowed.

The severity of this issue is being made public throughout Hawai‘i and all over the United States, with numerous newspaper articles being released on the controversial topic. Homelessness is a difficult issue and a lot is involved to find a solution that combats the root of the matter once and for all rather than providing a temporary fix. The main cause of the problem is the “lack of affordable housing in Hawai‘i,” as quoted by Neil J. Donovan, the executive director of the National Coalition for the Homeless in a recent article in the New York Times. The average cost of a one bedroom apartment in Honolulu is around $1,200 a month, which is out of reach for around 30% of Hawai‘i’s resident families, even on two adult incomes.

There is now the question of what has and will be done to aid in improving the unfortunate situation Hawai‘i has found itself in. At the state level, Governor Neil Abercrombie has hired former Vicar General of the Hawaii Catholic Church, Marc Alexander, to be his full time Coordinator on Homelessness. Back in May the two announced a “first call initiative” for people who want to offer assistance to individuals who have found themselves homeless. A news release on the 25th of April quoted Governor Abercrombie as saying; “addressing homelessness, as with all
of Hawai‘i’s challenges, requires us to work together in new ways. Our plan is to invest in the interventions, services, housing, and other efforts that will lead to long term solutions where we all take responsibility for our community.”

Gov. Neil Abercrombie has shown serious determination to tackle homelessness, demonstrated through implementing a 90-day plan to provide mental health services and help relocate individuals to shelters or other improved living circumstances. The state also gives counsel to those Churches and other feed the homeless locations to refrain from doing so, as to not encourage the homeless to stay where they are on the streets. Gov. Abercrombie has alleged that this 90-day plan that took effect in May, ending August 17th, is a way for the government to be held accountable and deliver on their word to combat homeless in Hawai‘i.

The 90-day plan is just the foundation being laid down as a building block to work towards eliminating homelessness on a grander scale. There are many others contributing to the efforts to help come up with creative and innovative ways to fight this struggle such as: “non-profits, community and faith-based organizations, businesses, shelter and outreach services,” as quote from a Hawai‘i state press release named, “Action Plan to Address Homelessness.”

In an interview with PBS Hawai‘i, Alexander, the recently appointed coordinator talks about the venture to fund “affordable housing development,” that unites the city, county and state to work together and address homelessness. The two and a half million dollars available to this project has come from a half percent property tax within state. The finances will go towards providing support services through public and private entities which are encouraging community involvement.

Although there has been an effort to fund projects such as “affordable housing,” two and a half million will not solve the current situation. Alexander has been consistent in saying that it is going to take a collaborative effort on the part of every resident and business in Hawai‘i to help abolish homelessness. The Department of community services in Hawai‘i is also in on the efforts to help; spending millions of dollars a year on the traditional forms of aid such as emergency shelter grants, while also tackling homelessness through prevention measures.

It is no secret that Hawaii’s economy is heavily reliant on tourist activity; therefore the image of the pristine, unspoiled islands is vital to the income and success of the state. With best efforts being put forward by the local government and the wider community, the issue of homelessness should improve before any serious damage is done to the state’s reputation as a vacationer’s paradise. As understood by Governor Abercrombie and Coordinator Alexander, the solution to this problem is a matter of working together to ease the burden of homelessness within Hawai‘i, to act as one O’hana and tackle this problem once and for all.