



February 6, 2025

To: Keani Rawlins-Fernandez, Chairwoman, Kōmike Aloha 'Aina Committee, Maui County Council

Re: Transitioning Kalawao County to Maui County

Thursday, February 6, 2025, 9 a.m., Maui County Council Chambers

Aloha Chairwoman Rawlins-Fernandez, Vice Chairwoman Paltin and members of the Committee,

Thank you for giving the public the opportunity to learn more about plans for the future of Kalaupapa. Even though government officials have been meeting for many years about this important transition, the public has no knowledge of what is being discussed.

My name is Valerie Monson, Executive Director of Ka 'Ohana O Kalaupapa, a 501-c-3 nonprofit organization created by the residents of Kalaupapa in 2003. Ka 'Ohana was the vision of Bernard Punikai'a, who was taken from his mother when he was just 6 ½ years old and sent to Kalaupapa a few years later in 1942.

Bernard went on to become one of the great leaders of Kalaupapa. As he saw the population of Kalaupapa getting smaller and the community growing older, Bernard felt it was critical to bring together family members, descendants and friends of Kalaupapa to make sure the voices of the Kalaupapa residents were always heard in directing the future and how Kalaupapa would be remembered.

Other residents echoed his concerns and played a key role in laying the foundation for Ka 'Ohana O Kalaupapa nearly 22 years ago.

We believe that those of us with Ka 'Ohana O Kalaupapa -- those who had family at Kalaupapa or who have been friends of residents for many years -- have a great deal of expertise and experiences that would help this transition team plan a better future. People on upper Molokai also have a wealth of knowledge and must be involved in planning the future of a significant

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part of their island. Because 1,300 acres of the Kalaupapa peninsula are designated as Hawaiian Homelands, beneficiaries might also request to be included.

Many people will be affected by the future of Kalaupapa.

The Kalaupapa transition team has been meeting for many years, yet we hear such conflicting statements about where they're at in the process -- some of these statements are from officials who are members of this team who seem to have a different idea of what has been accomplished.

There are times when we hear that the transition team is still in the early stages of planning the future -- such as deciding on who has the key to what -- but we also hear that the decision has already been made, that the National Park Service will have full jurisdiction at Kalaupapa, that the federal government will have complete control of one of Hawaii's most sacred places. We've also heard that Maui County will assume jurisdiction of Kalaupapa.

What is true? We just don't know.

A bill being heard this afternoon at the State Legislature states that Kalawao County -- which now comprises the entire Kalaupapa peninsula -- will cease to exist and -- I quote -- "shall be and form a portion of Maui County." (emphasis added)

Has there ever been a public hearing or meeting on Molokai or Maui about this transfer? If there has been, I apologize that we did not know about it.

We have many questions about Kalaupapa becoming part of Maui County, including the county's expected future role, the costs, responsibilities. We hope this Committee will share what they know.

The bill before the Legislature also proposes creating a "Kalaupapa State Historical Area," which is subject to the State's 6-E process that includes special restrictions. According to the bill, the purpose of this historical area is "to educate the public, to commemorate the lives of the residents with Hansen's disease and the lives of the people who served them, and to recognize the county of Kalawao and its role in the history of Hawaii."

Ka 'Ohana O Kalaupapa has been doing all of the above for the past 22 years without a special designation. If you read the information in the yellow packet that was delivered to each of you by Ka 'Ohana earlier this week, you will see that our organization has helped nearly 1,000 descendants learn about or learn more about their ancestors -- no one was reaching out to the families and descendants until Ka 'Ohana O Kalaupapa.

We have created two traveling exhibits that have been to every island and are currently on display -- one at 'Iolani Palace and the other at the Molokai Museum and Cultural Center -- and

we have developed a host of other educational and community outreach programs. We have been presented with seven Preservation Awards by Historic Hawai'i Foundation.

And, yet, we have been left out of the planning process.

There are so many components to this proposed plan, it makes us wonder who would have the final decision: Kalaupapa National Historical Park, Maui County or the lead agency of the Kalaupapa State Historical Area? What will be the role of the State of Hawai'i, of the Department of Land and Natural Resources, of the Department of Hawaiian Homelands?

Will there be independent oversight of these agencies at Kalaupapa by knowledgeable community members to keep the public involved?

We have many other questions about how the new system at Kalaupapa will work.

We hope this committee will send its concerns and questions to the Legislature. If the bill continues, we ask this Committee and the Council to recommend to the Legislature that Ka 'Ohana O Kalaupapa and a community group on upper Molokai be added immediately to the Kalaupapa Transition Team so voices of those with so much expertise will be included in these important discussions.

Thank you for considering my comments.

With aloha,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Valerie Monson".

Valerie Monson, Executive Director
Ka 'Ohana O Kalaupapa