

Tongan cop seeks help

By S.L. Wykes
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Chief inspector of the Kingdom of Tonga police Atunaisa Taumoepeau looked across the table in an East Palo Alto meeting room Saturday and explained one of the reasons he was there.

More and more Tongans who have chosen to live in the United States are being deported to Tonga, where opportunities can be limited and crime is becoming a problem.

Some of those Tongans the chief inspector has had to arrest have

Deportees, many from East Palo Alto, are contributing to rising crime in the island kingdom. So a visiting police inspector is asking community leaders to help him tackle the problem.

been from the large Pacific Islander community in East Palo Alto, one of several Bay Area cities where almost 70,000 people of Hawaiian and Pacific Island heritage live.

Taumoepeau, traveling with the Royal Tongan Police Brass Band at the end of a two-month tour of music competitions and overseas Tongan communities, took the opportunity

to ask East Palo Alto officials to sit down with him and listen.

At the meeting were East Palo Alto Mayor Duane Bay, Vice Mayor Pat Foster, city council candidate John Bostic and Robert Hoover, a longtime East Palo Alto community activist and board member of Pacific Islander Outreach, the organization that hosted the Tongan visitors.

Taumoepeau described a country that has undergone many changes in the last 40 years. The kingdom includes 171 islands with just 100,000 residents, whose life has been relatively peaceful until recent years.

"In the '60s and '70s, we maybe had one armed robbery," Taumoepeau said. "Now we have one almost every month."

Until the American consul donated a computer to the police department recently, Tongan police were

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keeping track of records solely by hand and on paper. A little over a year ago, the police department instituted its first narcotics division.

The country still has no juvenile court system, which means children as young as 14 must go through the adult justice system, including prison. The younger prisoners learn from the older ones, he said, "and when they come out, they commit new crimes usually within a month."

Foster recognized the situation from her native island, St. Lucia. Young people deported back there "are so angry," she said. "It's a big transition. There should be a program to

receive them."

Pacific Islander Outreach's executive director, Dee Uhila, was ready to take action "to keep Tonga from being a dumping ground," she said. Her brother, Senter, also quite involved in the Pacific Islander community, said he knew of 36 young Tongans deported from East Palo Alto. The system is sending back "a hazardous polluted person to pollute there," he said.

"We cannot ask people to help unless we help ourselves," Uhila said. She said she would put out the word to try to get support programs started and asked Taumoepeau to collect data on the number of people who have been deported and the crimes they committed

that triggered the deportations.

"We are definitely going to continue this group and continue our talk and work. Our island community will be there."

Hoover supports programs in East Palo Alto that would prevent the kind of criminal behavior that could lead to deportation.

"Invest your money in your young children," he said. "Invest it in programs where you can monitor your children. We have got to pay more attention to our children."

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