We were alarmed when the New York Post reported that New York City was sending its homeless to Hawai‘i and elsewhere. As it turned out, Hawai‘i may have received only a few homeless from the Big Apple. Besides, like New York, our local social service agencies have been sending the homeless back to their mainland homes for some time now, but in a different manner and style.

We call it “repatriation,” and it involves a rather lengthy, comprehensive process in which family members are notified of the situation and agree to look after the homeless individual, and only after that evaluation does the service provider offer to pay the airfare to fly the homeless person back to his or her home state. The other half is paid by the family.

Hawai‘i Lodging & Tourism Association has prioritized and funded repatriation efforts statewide through partnerships with Institute for Human Services, Kaua‘i Economic Opportunity and Maui’s Family Life Center, enabling more than 500 individuals to reunite with friends or family on the mainland with less than 1 percent finding their way back to Hawai‘i. This method establishes a support system to reduce the likelihood of recidivism, while the airfare buy-in ensures that all parties are committed to the cause.

We continue to see progress on other fronts as well. We lobbied the Legislature to authorize up to $1 million in matching public funds, via Hawai‘i Tourism Authority, for homelessness services.

We reached the match ceiling successfully during the past year, and every county had recipient nonprofit organizations.

In Chinatown, for example, Hawai‘i Health & Harm Reduction Center raised more than $60,000 and received $90,162 in matching funds to hire a staffer to help police and sheriff’s deputies find housing and social services for homeless people who might be arrested or cited for assorted violations. Chinatown Improvement District raised $18,000, a sum matched by $15,000 in public funds, to expand private security patrols to curb trespassing.

Under the leadership of Honolulu Police Department Chief Susan Ballard and Capt. Mike Lambert, we were pleased to recently learn that HPD is succeeding with its Law Enforcement Assisted Diversion, or LEAD, approach with the able assistance of HHHRC. The LEAD program gives police officers a pathway to direct homeless to social service agencies rather than arresting them.

According to the one-year program evaluation report, 47 individuals were invited to join Honolulu’s LEAD program. The 37 people who ultimately enrolled in the program experienced a 55 percent reduction in law enforcement encounters and a 40 percent reduction in the use of emergency medical services. This is a staggering improvement.

Ballard told tourism executives earlier this year that HPD was embarking on this new approach to homelessness modeled after a similar program initiated in Seattle. This pronouncement motivated the industry to render strong support for this initiative.

On another front, tourism industry insiders this past week heard a sobering report on sex trafficking in the islands, a lot of which takes place in hotels. This gathering was the result of HLTA joining HTA, which helped fund the symposium, and Ho‘ola Nā Pua to sponsor the inaugural Campaign for a Safer Community that was held in all four counties and focused on educating hospitality employees to recognize and report sex trafficking.

Law enforcement faces limitations on its capability to fight sex trafficking. That’s why public-private partnerships are essential, with front-line employee training high on the list of priorities.

A number of states require hotels to post signs explaining what trafficking is and what numbers to call if someone suspects a problem, and very stiff penalties exist in states like Arizona, where a guilty trafficker was sentenced to over 490 years in jail!

Some of the pointers that were emphasized by a group of expert panelists stated that front desk employees should be aware of adults checking in with unrelated minors. Another telltale sign is when a guest has lots of so-called “friends” or “relatives” wanting access to the room. Housekeepers should watch for do-not-disturb signs posted on the door or refusal of cleaning services for several days.

We’ll be working with industry leaders to re-affirm the message that we take this matter seriously. Trafficking is indecent, illegal and immoral, and we’ll do more to cooperate with law enforcement officials from police departments to Homeland Security to root out this scourge from our community.

We’ll encourage and support lawmakers who wish to advocate for stronger and stricter legislation to combat sex trafficking. And we’ll encourage the public that they, too, need to step up their involvement to help eradicate one of the most inhumane crimes of our times!