

# Finding a way home

**Despite dire money straits, relief for homelessness is emerging**

By Vicki Viotti

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Ron Cullen paused for a moment while gathering his belongings along Keawe Street last month.

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That, it appears, is how the government's assault on homelessness is playing out during a legislative session gripped with dire fiscal realities. But offsetting the dearth of dollars is an abundance of determination from community leaders and service providers who are finding partners to help limited funding stretch further.

At the helm of this push to bring more stability to the lives of the chronically and newly homeless are the House and Senate housing committee chairwomen — Rep. Rida Cabanilla and Chun Oakland, respectively — and state and city human services agencies.

What money there is is being squeezed from sources such as the city and state rental housing funds, and officials have concluded it's much cheaper to rehabilitate existing, vacant living spaces than to develop new ones. Anthony Ching, executive director of the state Hawaii Community Development Authority, has marshalled his staff to seek them out. Three with potential to house 150 or more people have been identified in Moiliili.

This is part of what policymakers call the "housing first" approach to aid chronically homeless people, who often have their poverty conditions compounded by mental illness or drug addiction.

State Sen. Suzanne Chun Oakland looked grim as she took her seat at the Homeless Community Caucus meeting on Thursday. Moments before, she had watched the proposal to raise the general excise tax go down in flames. The revenue from that could have

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## ADVANCING IN THE LEGISLATURE

*Here are some of the key bills concerning homelessness that are still moving through the Legislature:* SB 900, SD2, HD1: Appropriates funds to designate surplus or available open or vacant space as a "safe haven" ("tent city") for persons who are homeless.

**HB 160, HD2, SD1:** Appropriates money from the emergency and budget reserve fund for public health, safety, welfare and education, including \$1 million to fund the "housing first" program for chronically homeless persons.

**SB 904, SD2:** Requires the state Department of Human Services to locate properties for a "housing first" program in the urban core.

**SB 897, SD2, HD1:** Creates an advisory, unpaid interagency council, similar to one established by Congress, to develop a 10-year plan to combat homelessness in Hawaii.

**SB 912, SD2, HD1:** Makes appropriations to improve the existing public and affordable rental housing stock and increase public and affordable rental housing units.

**SB 1394, SD1:** Authorizes the Hawaii Public Housing Authority to enter into contracts with developers to develop public housing projects in exchange for commercial space in the project.

Providing them first with a roof over their heads helps them become more receptive to treatment or other services, Cabanilla said. That little bit of normalcy is often a necessary first step.

"It promotes healing," she said. "Whatever their issues are, they have a place to stabilize their mind. It promotes pride. They think, 'I'm like the person next door.'"

Inside the state Capitol basement conference room on Thursday, lawmakers and social service leaders of the Homeless Community Caucus pored over spreadsheets and checklists of whatever resources might be

things are swept away," said the man, who gave only his first name, Charles. "It breaks my heart every day."

Charles has lived at Next Step, the Kakaako shelter, for six months; his existence on the street was even harder. Figures on the homeless population are being updated, but numbers reportedly have increased. They include many who moved here from the Micronesian islands under the federal Compact of Free Association, many who have lost jobs and then apartments because of the recession. They joined many of the "chronically homeless" with problems complicated by substance abuse, mental illness or other health problems.

Whatever the cause of the problem, and despite a dire shortage of government funds currently, the caucus is determined to put together at least partial solutions as soon as possible.

There are various strategies being pursued, both privately and through bills making their way through the Legislature (see accompanying list), though not everyone is perfectly aligned on the ideas.

For example, many see the idea of creating a "safe zone" — a legal encampment area for the homeless, provided with some security and sanitation amenities — as a useful stopgap measure, one that's preferable to scattered tents along sidewalks or in brushy rural enclaves. They contend it would buy time while an inventory of more permanent housing units is compiled.

Doran Porter is the executive director of the Affordable Housing and Homeless Alliance, a nonprofit coalition

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best known for its resource centers providing case management, referrals, food, clothing and mailbox services to the homeless. In addition, outreach is done to encampments around the island, Porter said, and that becomes difficult when the city performs its cleanup sweeps; crews can no longer find people they are trying to help.

Safe zones, (also known as "safe havens" or "tent cities") at least would provide an alternative place for campers to go when shelters are unavailable or unwanted, Porter said.

"Having people in one location, they would be safer," he said. "They wouldn't be forced to go to unsafe locations."

He acknowledged that there are challenges providing hygiene and security in the zones. This is also a concern for Marc Alexander, the state's newly appointed homelessness coordinator, who sees safe zones as a dubious improvement.

Tent cities are more clearly temporary facilities in cities like Seattle, where those without shelter are motivated by the weather alone to work their way into more conventional accommodations, he said. Hawaii's mild weather provides a lure that would seem even more attractive if a government-sanctioned, decently serviced campground is established, Alexander said.

"It would be like ecotourism, but for the wrong clientele," he added.

Alexander has his sights set, long-term, on encouraging the development of a much healthier inventory of permanent rentals that the working poor can afford. But he agrees with another concept being pursued to help the chronically homeless: "housing first," a policy of getting these people stable shelter, which then makes them more receptive to medical treatment and social assistance.

"Creating safe havens and implementing the 'housing first' program work," said state Rep. Rida Cabanilla, who chairs the state Housing Committee. "It will alleviate the serious health risks involved."

State Sen. Suzanne Chun Oakland, who convened Thursday's caucus meeting, said one result of the economic downturn is that there are more properties that may be available for government to acquire affordably.

For example, one of the caucus members is Anthony Ching, executive director of the Hawaii Community Development Authority. He said his staff did a real estate search of urban properties that might be candidates for renovation as transitional housing, whether for families or the more chronically homeless. Three have been identified (see map): privately owned apartment complexes on Piikoi and Banyan streets, and a center currently used for youth detention for the Judiciary on Alder Street.

The Hawaii Association of Realtors, in addition, reported to the caucus about its plans to meet with community association managers who know about residences in foreclosure. Others are coming to light as word gets out that the caucus is on the lookout, Chun Oakland said.

"As we've been having these meetings, or people from the group kind of think about things, they've been calling individually and saying, 'You know, there's a property here, there's an opportunity here,'" she told caucus members. "Just by us meeting on a regular basis, there seems to be that synergy that's occurring."

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