

# Homeless might lose preference

The state wants to accept tenants first come, first served

By Mary Vorsino

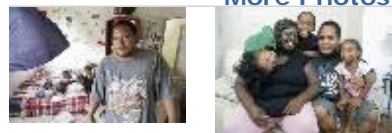
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Shelter resident Brian Anakalea shares this room with his girlfriend, Maria Jennings, and her six children. The family, with keiki ranging in age from 3 to 10, lived in its Ford Explorer before going to the Onelauena emergency shelter in Kalaheo three months ago. The family hopes to get public housing.

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It's a dramatic policy shift that advocates worry could stymie efforts to move more families off the streets and into long-term housing.

The proposals would significantly change how the Hawaii Public Housing Authority, the state's largest affordable housing landlord, allocates its highly sought-after units.

The state has never before closed its waiting list for public housing, and its preference system has been in place for more than a decade.

At a time when the Abercrombie administration has pledged a concerted effort to address the state's worsening homeless crisis, several advocates warn the changes would almost undoubtedly have a ripple effect, keeping homeless families in shelters longer instead of allowing them to move on to make way for the newly homeless. Some transitional homeless shelters, where families typically can stay up to two years, send upward of 50 percent of their residents to public housing — often the only option for low-income families who can't find below-market rentals.

"You shut down the faucet for housing, dribbling though it may be now, then nobody moves," said Bill Hummel, social work supervisor at the Lighthouse Outreach Center, an emergency shelter in Waipahu. Hummel said the proposed housing policy changes could be "catastrophic."

Hawaii Public Housing Authority officials say the proposals, which still must be discussed in public hearings and voted on by the agency's board, are about fairness and making sure there is a mix of incomes and family types in public housing. They also

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public housing, which has grown to more than 10,400 families, and do away with a preference system that puts homeless people at the front of the line for available units.



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waiting list, giving families false hope about their chances of getting into housing.

The number of families on the waiting list for public housing has increased by 22 percent — or nearly 2,000 families — since January 2010.

HPHA is seeking to close its waiting list as early as this summer, but changes to its preference system likely wouldn't take effect until next year.

Denise Wise, HPHA executive director, said getting rid of preferences — and moving to a "date and time" placement system — would be a more equitable and efficient way of choosing who gets into public housing: first come, first served.

"We have working families on the list. We have homeless families on the list," she said. "One of the things that's important in bringing on anybody is some form of income. Date and time placement ... (would ensure) a more balanced mix."

For families with preference, the wait to get into one of the state's 6,121 public housing units is now about two years. Those without preference may have to wait seven years or longer. (One person without preference who was recently placed had been on the waiting list since 1997, and finally secured a unit because he had "aged into" elderly housing).

Currently, the housing authority has preferences that guarantee quicker placement for the homeless, victims of domestic violence or people who have been involuntarily displaced.

Of the 10,456 families on the waiting list in May, about 7,000 claimed preference, the HPHA said. Of those, about two-thirds — or nearly 4,700 families — were homeless.

Applicants for elderly housing are considered separately, and officials said the waiting list for those units will not be closed off.

The housing authority's proposed changes to how it places people into units come as the state is ramping up its efforts to address homelessness, and as advocates report homeless families — many of whom have lost their jobs or seen their wages cut because of the economic downturn — are finding it harder to get

by the state, the City and County of Honolulu and a private group called Partners In Care indicates homelessness is on the rise.

According to the report, 4,234 sheltered and unsheltered homeless were counted on Oahu in January, up 16 percent from 2009. Advocates say the figures don't include the hundreds of families who are staying with relatives or friends after losing their homes, and those who, because of beach and park sweeps, have moved into more remote areas along the shoreline and in mountainous areas.

Maria Jennings, her boyfriend and her six children found themselves homeless in October after the couple was laid off — weeks apart — leaving them unable to cover their rent. The family, with children ranging in age from 3 to 10, lived in its Ford Explorer before going to the Onelauena emergency shelter in Kalaeloa three months ago.

Jennings, 29, said her family's search for an affordable rental has gone about as well as her search for a new job — nothing has come through. Her boyfriend, Brian Anakalea, was only recently rehired as a carnival ride operator.

She said at this point she's not picky about what rental she finds.

"I would take whatever," said Jennings, who plans to apply for public housing. "I want my own place. I want to get back on my feet. I would literally die for public housing."

In Honolulu, the Talley family is also looking for an

back on their feet.

**Problem growing**

Hawaii in March from California with their three children and quickly ran through their savings. Though John Talley was born and spent part of his childhood on the Big Island, he didn't expect the cost of living to be quite so high.

They ended up at the Institute for Human Services shelter in Kalihi, and the couple is scrambling to find jobs so they can put money down on a rental. They have also applied to public housing and other programs.

"It's been challenging," said John Talley, whose children are 8, 5 and 3. "I was a little too hopeful. I thought we could get a place really fast."

Marc Alexander, the state's coordinator on homelessness, said the public housing authority is a key player in the state's push to move people out of shelters.

Alexander declined to comment on the proposed changes to public housing placement policies because he had not studied the issues. But he said his short-term concern is not how public housing is allocated, but whether all the vacant units in projects are being filled.

"You can talk about policies and we need to do that," Alexander said, "but the first thing is, let's fix the units up and make them so that someone is in them."

At last count, about 420 public housing units statewide were vacant and in varying stages of being returned to service, the HPHA said. The housing authority has long struggled — because of backlogged repairs and a small staff — to turn around vacant units quickly.

### Units empty

In a management audit of HPHA released Friday, the state auditor said "erratic oversight" was also to blame for slow turnarounds on vacant units, but noted that many of the problems predated Wise's tenure at HPHA; she joined the agency 14 months ago.

The report said vacated units remained empty for six months on average before being made available for rent.

emphasized that any changes to policies on the waiting list or preferences for placement will be made as part of overall improvements to the long-beleaguered housing authority.

She added that public housing should not be seen as the "only answer" for homeless families looking for permanent housing, and that the changes are designed to balance the "needs of the entire waiting list as best we can."

"The truth of the matter is, income does not keep pace with housing costs," Wise said.

Since 2006, the state has spent tens of millions of dollars to open up new homeless shelters and beef up outreach services, and those efforts have resulted in a marked decrease in the number of people, especially families, living in parks and on beaches. The biggest frustration for families and homeless providers remains a dearth of affordable housing. New low-rent units have been slow in coming and public housing, where families pay up to 30 percent of their income, is the only viable choice for some.

"Transitioning is not easy," said Sandi Miyoshi, director of the state's homeless programs branch. "There is a glass ceiling and that glass ceiling is affordable housing."

Miyoshi said many families find themselves having to stay more than two years at transitional homeless shelters.

Because the shortage of affordable housing is nothing new, the state has long used preferences to move

In a letter of response to the audit, Wise agreed with its conclusions and said many problems cited in the report were on her "to do" list.

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for public housing, something housing authorities in other states also do.

Several advocates agreed closing the waiting list and getting rid of preferences would significantly increase the length of time homeless families would need to remain in shelters as they look for permanent housing. But homeless service providers had mixed reactions to the proposed changes, with several saying they understand the housing authority's concerns.

### 'Unfair'

In fiscal year 2010, 55 percent of those who exited transitional homeless shelters statewide went into permanent housing, according to newly compiled statistics from the University of Hawaii Center on the Family. Of those, 39 percent found subsidized housing, which includes public housing and rental vouchers.

Tanya Tehotu, a program specialist at the Onelauena shelter, which is operated by Waianae Community Outreach, said the homeless should be given priority for open public housing units because they have the greatest need. Housing the homeless, she said, is "the goal of public housing."

Nanci Kreidman, chief executive officer of the Domestic Violence Action Center, said she also believes preferences provide more benefit than harm. She said victims of domestic violence are often homeless or in danger of homelessness.

"I can see how it feels unfair," she said. "But we advocated for the preference because without stable housing or housing at all, there's an increased likelihood that victims are forced to relocate back with their abuser."

At Weinberg Village Waimanalo, more than half of the 55 families who exited the transitional homeless shelter from August 2008 to May 2011 went into public housing, said director Holly Holowach. She said the reality for some of the families the shelter serves is that "they will never survive without public housing. They are willing to work, to give back to society and the community ... but they just can't afford to pay more than public housing rents."

Other service providers said that although they are

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Housing Solutions, which operates four transitional homeless shelters in the state, said the changes "would slow us way down."

"We'd have to keep the transitional people there for much longer," he said. "Because so many are underemployed, they don't have the wherewithal for market housing."

But he added that even though the homeless preference "benefited us" in moving homeless families out of shelters, "it is overall unfair and it may in a general sense promote" abuses of the system. "The question is, if you have this preference ... does that mean it pays to be homeless?"

worried about how the proposed changes would affect their agencies, they also understand the housing authority's interest in reassessing how public housing units are distributed.