

IHS program gives kids a summer of fun

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Junior leader Geoffrey Labombard, third from left, leads children from the Institute for Human Services summer program in an exercise game.

Thirty-five children staying at the Institute for Human Services' homeless shelter with their families are learning everything from robotics to money management this summer as part of a unique program whose biggest goal is to give participants good memories during a difficult time in their lives.

"My job is to give them that real summer experience," said Angela Dumais, children's program coordinator at IHS in Kalihi. "We wanted to offer them something fun and educational."

The program was launched last summer as a two-week pilot, and 22 children participated. This year it runs for a month, wrapping up Friday.

Participants, who range in age from 5 to 16, have taken a host of field trips — to museums, beaches and other sites — and have transformed their area of the shelter in Iwilei into a learning laboratory. Kids are learning robotics, financial literacy, music and dance, and environmental sustainability.

IHS staff said they know of no other emergency shelter in the state with its own summer program for kids.

The program is part of an ongoing effort by IHS to expand its educational offerings. During the school year, IHS has after-school tutoring and other programs.

Dumais, who was hired two years ago, works with parents, students and schools to boost students' grades and help them work on issues such as attendance and completing homework.

The shelter hopes to make its "Summer Fun" program — paid for by donations — an annual offering.

Connie Mitchell, IHS executive director, said the program is about letting kids be kids, and encouraging children in the shelter to bond.

"I think that giving them experiences that they can be proud of — they're learning new skills, they're learning leadership — I think it really lifts them up," she said. "That's really a part of what we're all about."

Mitchell said the program was started because children had nothing to do during the summer. Families often didn't want to enroll their kids in other free summer programs because they were embarrassed about their home address — a shelter on Kaaahi Street.

Earlier this week the IHS "summer fun" group was at Magic Island, playing in the waves like any other bunch of kids on summer break.

Two of the program's younger kids emerged from the water, delightedly talking about how they had chased

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after fish. Before long, brisk trade winds had them shivering, and one small swimmer asked Dumais, "Can I go back in?"

When he got a nod, he ran back into the water. And his friend followed quickly behind.

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