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About That 90-Day Plan on Homelessness ...

By Chad Blair | 08/19/2011

With homeless service providers by his side at Kakaako's Next Step shelter Aug. 14, Gov. [Neil Abercrombie](#) announced the results of the state's 90-day plan on homelessness.

The outcome, [the governor said](#), included an "unprecedented coordination and focus" among government agencies and private groups, and the moving of 530 people from the street or emergency shelters into transitional or permanent housing.

Later in the week, at an event at Washington Place, Abercrombie pointed to the [front-page story](#) that ran in the [Honolulu Star-Advertiser](#) Aug. 15 — "3-month effort removes hundreds from streets" — as an example of his administration's accomplishments.

Given that [nearly 14,000 people](#) in the state experienced homelessness and received services between July 1, 2009, and June 30, 2010, the state's achievements are laudable. There's consensus that the governor deserves credit for helping bring people together to focus on the problem.

But to more accurately measure the effort, some context is required.

No Baseline

To begin with, the state does not know how many homeless people were moved into housing during the 90 days *prior* to the launching of the 90-day initiative, which launched May 17. It's reasonable to think that the good people working on this problem had some success in the months preceding the governor's push.

"Some people are wondering what was accomplished, because in the press conference there was no baseline," said Doran Porter, CEO of the [Affordable Housing and Homeless Alliance](#). "We are not sure if the same accomplishment would have happened if the 90-day plan was in place or not."

The nonprofit alliance has resource centers for homeless people throughout Oahu. But it was not one of the statewide organizations involved with the 90-day plan. Porter said the alliance had not seen a significant reduction in the number of clients it helps.

Like most experts, Porter said the main problem contributing to homelessness is a lack of affordable housing — something he believes the governor understands.

"Anything we can do to impact and help those who are victims by becoming homeless, I think, is positive," said Porter. "But until we address the issue of affordable housing, we are funding temporary solutions, and people will go back on the streets."

As well, more housing is just part of the solution.

"There continues to be a need for resources, and the economy has continued to get worse, and we have experienced cuts just as everyone else has," said Porter. "We have not been able to do as much outreach. Some barriers to housing where we have been able to provide services — like producing IDs and birth certificates, which people need to get housing — we may not be able to provide for much longer."

'Check Back in 90 Days'



Chad Blair/Civil Beat

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Other service providers say there is solid evidence that more people have been moved into housing.

"I think there are some deliverables," said Sheila Beckham, executive director of the Waikiki Health Center, one of the state's partners and the organization that manages the Next Step shelter. "We log calls and so forth, and we can say with certainty that we have got more people into shelters, that we've had a lot more calls, that people are transitioning into transitional housing or getting out."

Beckham did acknowledge, however, that there is no specific benchmark to measure the progress.

"A lot of effort went into the last 90 days" she said. "I am heartened that there has been more help for the elderly. But the problem of homelessness waxes and wanes, and 90 days is not very long to see how an entire system changes."

Beckham continued: "I believe we are on the right track, and we really have seen a difference. But you might want to check back in 90 days."

Conservative Counts

Marc Alexander, the governor's coordinator on homelessness, told Civil Beat he agreed it would be useful to know how his 90 days compared with the previous three months. But the data just isn't available.

"Part of this is that some of our providers haven't been putting data in as they ought to be, so that's a challenge," said Alexander, adding that some agencies have been forced to cut back on staff.

Alexander went directly to providers to obtain data and enter it into the state's database system. Unfortunately, that database — the Homeless Management Information System — is outdated and difficult to extract data sets from.

The estimate of 530 people who have been helped is also a conservative figure, he said.

"Some Maui numbers, for example, seemed a lot higher than what could be tracked in terms of being placed," he said. "I am a classic skeptic, and if it seems too good to be true, it probably is. We erred on the conservative side."

Connie Mitchell, executive director of the Institute of Human Services, agrees.

"I think we really tried to provide Marc with the data from each of our different agencies, and we tried to be as conservative as possible," she said. "He specifically wanted to know who they were — in the urban areas of Wakiki, for example. And we did place a lot of people into housing. But we were very careful — the numbers are plausible."

Keeping the Momentum

Mitchell said she hopes the momentum that was made in dealing with homelessness continues, though she acknowledges her staff put considerable extra effort into the 90 days.

"I think the relationships that have been built were key — we probably would not have been able to achieve those same numbers if we had not collaborated," she said. "Over the long term I believe this will bear fruit."

Alexander expressed optimism that that would happen. He said the state's homeless efforts would be helped with money coming for Housing and Urban Development next month.

By October, the University of Hawaii's Center on the Family is expected to release a new report on the homeless with data that was collected through June 30.

(It was the center that reported the figure, cited at the top of this article, of nearly 14,000 people who experienced homelessness in fiscal year 2010.)

"It will only include the couple of months that we have been working on this, but it will show us something," said Alexander.

A HUD point-in-time count in January will also shed light on how effective the state's efforts have been.

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