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HAWAII NEWS

\$30 million in 'ohana zone' funding leads to multiple state projects

By [Dan Nakaso](#) · Dec. 30, 2019

In the 2018 legislative session, lawmakers approved a whopping \$30 million to fund a homeless concept that started out as tent cities, then morphed into undefined “safe zones” and finally became law under the banner of “ohana zones.”

The exact definition of an ohana zone was purposely vague, said Scott Morishige, the state’s homeless coordinator, which has allowed a wide range of homeless-related projects to recently come online across all of the islands, such as Hawaii’s first pop-up triage project in Waipahu Cultural Garden Park, called the “Homeless Outreach and Navigation for Unsheltered Persons” — or HONU, which officially opened Dec. 13.

“The one thing that was clear in the legislation was ohana zone funds are meant to support people to transition out of homelessness,” Morishige said. “So we’re very intentional in making sure that the funds could be used for programs that do exactly that.”

Marc Alexander, director of the city’s Office of Housing, said, “The reality is that the legislators themselves were all over the place, so they wanted a program that would allow for that flexibility, recognizing also that it wasn’t one size fits all.”

All of the \$30 million has since been earmarked over the next three years for a wide range of homeless-related projects that will continue to materialize in the first part of 2020.

The ohana zone funding is paying for everything from roof repairs at homeless shelters to prevent them from shutting down to social service workers’ salaries to government housing vouchers to subsidize permanent housing.

Since the funds were approved, Morishige said, 440 homeless people have been helped, including 77 who now have permanent homes as of Halloween.

The numbers do not include people helped by more recent programs such as HONU; the city’s Kumu Wai building for homeless senior citizens, which was unveiled recently but has yet to be occupied; and for Maui and Kauai counties’ LEAD programs, which pair police officers with social service outreach workers — similar to Honolulu’s LEAD program, Morishige said.

Gov. David Ige has since signed a seventh supplemental emergency proclamation that extends his original homeless proclamation that he signed Dec. 14, 2018. The latest proclamation extends the emergency relief period until Feb. 14.

“The emergency proclamation helps to accelerate the completion of housing projects for individuals and families who are transitioning out of homelessness, and expands shelter capacity and access to services, especially for unsheltered individuals,” Ige’s office said in an announcement.

Over the next three years, Morishige said, state officials “want to evaluate all of the programs and see what works and what doesn’t, giving time for these programs to demonstrate results,” Morishige said. “Already we’re seeing people get off the streets and move into permanent housing. The fact that we’re seeing that so early is a positive sign.”

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The first ohana zone funds — \$1.8 million — were allocated in January 2018 to Kailua's RYSE (Residential Youth Services and Empowerment) to add additional beds and outreach services.

Lori Tshako, director of Maui County's Department of Housing and Human Concerns, said her county appreciates the \$800,000 in ohana zone funding that will allow for property management, security and case management for low-income, homeless families who will move into currently dilapidated University of Hawaii dormitories which will be renovated and converted into permanent housing.

"We really appreciate the ohana zone funding because it'll help us ... get people out of transitional shelter and into permanent housing," Tshako said. "That'll be a big help."

Maui County can use even more assistance.

Its LEAD program is run by two Maui police sergeants and a single outreach worker.

Tshako said, "I would love to have an outreach program like Oahu does where we can send a psychiatrist into the street to actually work with people and get them off the street, as well. On Maui we don't really have that quality of resource."

The single biggest allocation of ohana funds — \$7.5 million — went to Catholic Charities Hawaii's Villages of Maili Assessment Center and Bridge Housing to provide 80 emergency shelter and transitional shelter beds on the Leeward Coast.

The ohana zone funds also provided \$6 million for the HONU project. The 10 inflatable structures — which are intended to be divided in 2020 to run two separate HONUs in two different city parks — cost \$35,000 each for a total of \$350,000, along with a \$650,000 budget for vehicles, a hygiene trailer and other equipment.

The biggest HONU expense is \$5 million for 24/7 staffing, security, supplies and other around-the-clock costs for 36 months — or \$140,000 monthly for two sites.

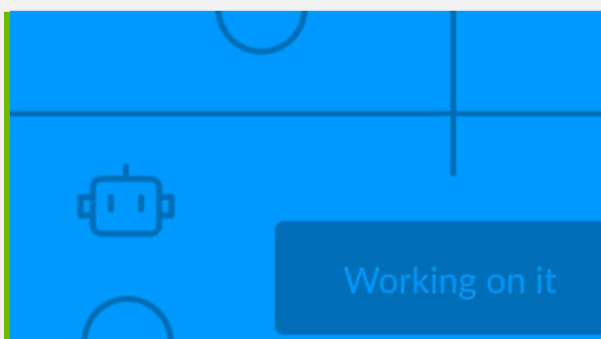
"Next year we're going to have two sites at the same time," he said. "You can't just hire anyone. They need education and training."

Alexander said the flexibility of the ohana zone funding allowed for projects such as HONU, which was the brainchild of the Honolulu Police Department's point man on homelessness, Capt. Mike Lambert.

In an initial presentation of the HONU concept, Mayor Kirk Caldwell referred to Lambert as "the birth father" of the idea.

But without the ohana zone funding, Alexander said, "an idea is just an idea."

"We're grateful for the state," Alexander said. "This is part of the legislative process, that in the discussion they decided to make it broad so it could be flexible and allow us to be creative."



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