



Wednesday, June 16, 2021 | Today's Paper | 86°

HAWAII NEWS

City hopes to efficiently distribute federal funds for homelessness by deadline

By [Ashley Mizuo](#) • Today • Updated 3:57 pm

Oahu has about \$24 million in federal COVID-19 funds to spend on homelessness outreach and housing — of which \$10 million is going to a new program called Oahu Housing Now. It places homeless individuals and families into market-rate rental units.

However, 20% of the \$24 million — or \$4.8 million — must be spent by September, said Laura Thielen, executive director at Partners in Care, Oahu's planning body that coordinates housing and services for homeless individuals.

If the funds are not spent, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development might take back \$5 million.

"It's not just us that's going to be affected, not just my program," she said.

"It's the entire system."

Thielen emphasized the need to coordinate with the city Department of Community Services and Department of Budget and Fiscal Services to make sure that invoices are properly processed.

"What all of our service providers are asking for is, tell me what exactly I need," she said.

"Because if they're 1 cent off or their explanation doesn't exactly pinpoint what is required by fiscal, it'll be popped back."

City Council Chairman Tommy Waters pointed out that the budget the Council recently passed, and which is awaiting the mayor's approval, included five more positions in purchasing within the Department of Budget and Fiscal Services to expedite these transactions.

Waters also advocated for redoing the computer system within the Department of Budget and Fiscal Services.

"What am I understanding is it's still paper going back and forth," he said.

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"It could be really, really more efficient if we upgraded our computer system."

There is a second deadline of March when 80% of the \$24 million will need to be spent. Thielen said meeting these deadlines will be crucial for the Oahu Housing Now program, which pays participating landlords a full 12 months of rent. Following an [article by the Honolulu Star-Advertiser](#) emphasizing the difficulties of getting landlords to participate in the project, Thielen said she received 25 calls from potential landlords looking to contribute.

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“We need to get landlords knowledgeable about these kinds of programs. We also need to address the discrimination against subsidized housing.”

Thielen urged the Council to address the amount of unit advertisements that do not allow any housing subsidies — as all four bills failed at the state Legislature this session.

“We go through the newspaper every single day, and we look at ads for units. Invariably, half of them say no Section 8, no subsidies,” she said.

“We are one of the very few states that do not have anti-subsidy legislation in place.”

Correction: An earlier version of this story misidentified the city Department of Community Services as the Department of Customer Services.

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