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EDITORIAL | OUR VIEW

Editorial: United effort can curb homelessness

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Longtime homeless and housing advocates know that it truly does take a village to find shelter for Oahu's most vulnerable villagers. But that mission is now urgent, with a statewide residential eviction moratorium ending in less than two months, and millions in federal funds facing a use-it-or-lose-it deadline in September. All hands must come on deck now — from renters to landlords, social workers to city employees — to get as many people into stable housing as quickly as possible.

The new Oahu Housing Now program, allotted \$10 million in federal COVID-19 relief funds and overseen by the Partners in Care alliance, is working against the clock to convince landlords to rent market-rate units to homeless people and those on the brink of homelessness. The state's eviction moratorium is due to expire on Aug. 6, after repeated extensions going back to Gov. David Ige's first pandemic emergency proclamation in March 2020. When that happens, housing experts warn, a surge of overdue, unpaid rents could unleash a flood of more homelessness.

New national reports released Wednesday revealed that the housing availability and affordability crisis is expected to worsen significantly post-pandemic. And the Census Bureau's biweekly Household Pulse Survey showed that nearly 4.2 million people nationwide fear that it was likely or somewhat likely they will be evicted or foreclosed upon in the next two months.

That is why it's imperative that as much as possible be done now to stave off that ominous wave. In one fortunate aspect, federal money is enabling efforts here.

"We have so much housing dollars coming through from the federal government right now that we really ought to think about how we can best use those monies to permanently house people," noted Connie Mitchell, executive director of the nonprofit Institute for Human Services, on Monday's Star-Advertiser "Spotlight Hawaii" webcast.

Still, getting landlords to rent to the homeless or near-homeless can take convincing — even though landlords are guaranteed rent and utility payments for the life of a lease, repairs for damage and access to case managers on client issues.

Oahu Housing Now targets homeless clients who could be working, and the newly homeless. The program's allotment is part of some \$24 million in federal COVID-19 funds the city received to spend on homelessness outreach and housing, with a September deadline to spend 20%, or \$4.8 million.

Other hefty aid programs exist — most notably, the Rental and Utility Relief Program, enabling the city to distribute \$114 million in federal COVID aid for rent and utilities by year's end. For up to 12 months, qualifying households can get up to \$2,500 monthly for back rent and utility payments, up to \$2,000 for future rent payments and up to \$500 for future utility payments.

Eligibility is for Oahu households earning up to 80% of the area median income (AMI) — up from the previous 50% AMI cap — which means about \$100,700 maximum yearly for a household of four.

Of course, all those who are homeless or on the brink, and who are capable, must make the effort to help themselves. To that end, federal housing subsidies also involve wrap-around services and case management, plus job-seeking and financial literacy training toward self-sufficiency.

Also crucial to pushing out the monetary aid: stepped-up coordination between service providers and the city's budget and

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Clearly, a good amount of federal money is here to help Oahu's most economically battered through the pandemic storm. Oahu cannot waste this opportunity to mitigate the dire predictions of worsening homelessness after Aug. 6 — and to make headway in stabilizing many people for the long term who otherwise might've fallen into homelessness. But this race against time will take a mighty village effort — by social services and government to efficiently manage the programs, by landlords and tenants to make things work, and by those in or on the cusp of homelessness to help themselves.

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