

HAWAII NEWS

Homeless outreach Evaluator touts HONU program as a ‘success’

By [Mark Ladao](#) • June 20, 2021

A state-contracted researcher spent three nights sleeping this weekend at the Homeless Outreach and Navigation for Unsheltered Persons facility at Keehi Lagoon Beach Park, and found it to be an “extraordinary success.”

The HONU program launched in December 2019 and moved to Old Stadium Park in March 2020 before transitioning to its two current locations at Keehi Lagoon and Whitmore Village.

The program has served more than 1,600 homeless people, 900 of whom have since moved to other services, like emergency shelters, medical services or even permanent housing.

Heather Henderson, as the lead facilitator of the firm Collaborative Quality Consulting, or more commonly known as Focalize, is evaluating the HONU facility as part of an annual progress report of the state’s Ohana Zones programs.

After spending her first night at HONU Thursday, Henderson on Saturday commended the program’s ability to transition homeless people to services they need before she moved out today.

“There have been more than 1,400 people who have come through these doors, and of those, more than 50% have been placed in other services ... so it’s an extraordinary success,” she said.

Part of her evaluation is to sleep in a tent at Keehi Lagoon to get first-hand experience of the program.

All 34 people currently participating in the HONU program at Keehi Lagoon have their own tents, but multiple people set up their tents under a larger one. On Saturday, Henderson spent the last of three nights at the site, camped out in her own tent apart from the others.


Other than the separation, her experience was similar to everyone else’s.


“I really try to walk in the footsteps of what it would be like to stay here, so I eat the provisions that are given to us, and I hang out, and I go to bed at curfew, and I take the showers here,” she said. “I just want to be here, because there’s something happening all the time.”

Henderson, who has been a social worker for 25 years, said that the success of HONU, which is run by the Honolulu Police Department, “repositions” the role of police in homeless and mental health services.

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“The working theory was that nobody would come if HPD ran a shelter, and that has been proven false,” Henderson said. “I think the police add a sense of security that you don’t find necessarily with other forms of security or when social workers intervene on our own.”

Henderson said the HONU program is the only one in the nation that shelters homeless people and helps them navigate to other programs that are also run by a police department.

Scott Morishige, Gov. David Ige’s coordinator on homelessness, said HONU is an example of successful partnership between state and city agencies.

“It’s a state-funded program ... operated by the City and County of Honolulu and HPD,” he said. “The Ohana Zones in general are examples of how the state and, not only the City and County of Honolulu but actually all four counties, really are closely collaborating on a regular basis to get people out of the situation of homelessness.”

Morishige also said HONU is critical because it provides a 24-hour option for homeless people who need somewhere to stay, which not all shelters can provide.

Ultimately, he said, the HONU sites are transitional programs to get people to the services they need, which happens in roughly a week, although there is no set upper limit for people to stay at the site.

“In general ... they provide five days for someone to stabilize. And at the end of the five days ... they’ll ask the person to think through their options about what other shelter they would consider going to, and then really work to facilitate placement into the shelters that are identified,” Morishige said.

Henderson is also looking at how privacy plays a role in getting into services like HONU. Anecdotally, she said that people prefer to participate if they’re allowed some privacy, such as their own tents.

The HONU program is set to end in May 2022.



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