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## HAWAII NEWS

# Search is on for landlords to house homeless on Oahu

By [Dan Nakaso](#) • Today • Updated 12:47 am

Millions of dollars' worth of new housing vouchers are becoming available on Oahu just as a statewide ban on COVID-19-related evictions is scheduled to end in August, leading to fears that a new generation of families is about to become homeless.

So a hui of government officials and nonprofit agencies are scrambling to convince more landlords like Jonette Callo to take advantage of new federal funding to house people already homeless across Oahu and those who are soon to become homeless.

A new program called Oahu Housing Now began placing homeless clients into market-rate rental units in April using nearly \$11 million in new federal COVID-19 funds.

The program operates similarly to the existing state and county Housing First programs. Landlords are guaranteed rent and utility payments for the life of a lease, repairs for damage, and access to case managers for any issues with clients.

Landlords who might need even more convincing to house Oahu Housing Now clients could possibly receive 13 months of rent for a one-year lease, said Laura Thielen, executive director of Partners in Care, which oversees Oahu Housing Now.

But while Housing First is designed for Hawaii's most chronically and severe homeless, including those with mental health and substance abuse issues, Oahu Housing Now targets homeless clients "who could be working and newly homeless," said Scott Morishige, the state's homeless coordinator. "This program targets that layer below, the newly homeless who could be working on getting employment."

Morishige and others are simultaneously trying to find market-rate housing for clients of Oahu Housing Now, those eligible for Section 8 vouchers and so-called rapid re-housing funds through the Institute for Homeless Services to provide renters with one-time rental or utility funding to keep them housed or to get them back into housing before they spend too much time homeless.

Just since April, Oahu Housing Now has found homes for 74 households comprising 181 people. The goal is to house over 300 households by Sept. 1.

So far, 33 of the families have minor children; and 33% of the clients are Native Hawaiian, and another 29% are Pacific Islanders.

Many came out of homeless shelters or homeless encampments, Morishige said.

While Oahu Housing Now has seen early success, Morishige and Thielen know it's a big ask to get landlords to take in homeless people — especially after not getting paid rent since the COVID-19 pandemic led Gov. David Ige in April 2020 to issue a statewide moratorium on evictions for nonpayment. As the economy continues to improve and vaccination numbers increase, Ige expects to lift the ban in August.

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“We need to recognize that landlords are having a hard time as well,” Thielen said. “It’s a partnership. We are as invested in the landlords as we are in the clients.”

The Oahu rental housing market is so tight that IHS’ housing team constantly scours the Honolulu Star- Advertiser and online rental ads for new leads and regularly looks for rental signs while driving around the island, said IHS spokeswoman Jill Wright.

“We’re always trying to build our unit inventory and reach out to new landlords as much as possible,” Wright said in an email. “Right now, we estimate we need at least 30 more landlords to meet just the demand from our current clients.”

Callo learned about all of the financial benefits through Oahu Housing Now but was driven to rent her family’s newly renovated studio apartment in the Punahou area on May 28 to a 60-year-old homeless man for a different reason.

She did not even mention to the Star-Advertiser the guarantees of payments as a motivation.

“If I can help one person, then why not?” Callo said. “Obviously, we have a homeless problem here, and it’s gotten worse.”

Callo has gone down to IHS’ women’s shelter in Iwilei with her 14-year-old daughter, Madison, to help serve food. She and husband Greg also have joined their First Presbyterian Church in Koolau to distribute Christmas presents to the homeless.

But Callo wanted to show her daughter a bigger commitment by renting their studio apartment to Fred Long, 60, providing Long with the first home of his own in six years.

“We told her that we opened up our unit to a man that was homeless and was living in a shelter,” Callo said. “She thought that was great. We’re fortunate. And if we’re able to be a blessing to others, that’s what we want to do.”

Long told the Star-Advertiser that he understands he’s been given an opportunity that he does not want to mess up. He has lived at IHS’ men’s shelter, the city’s Provisional Outdoor Screening and Triage facility at Keehi Lagoon Park and most recently at Next Step Shelter, where he was asked last month whether he wanted to participate in Oahu Housing Now.

“I’ve got to get my act in order,” Long said. “Getting a job, that’s the top priority. I’ve got to get a job.”

Chersy Ponochev, 40, and her three boys — ages 4, 7 and 9 — also moved into the first home of their own in more than three years last month.

She works as a teacher’s aide at Parents and Children Together but struggles to afford rent.

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Ponochew also tried living with her cousin’s family and in a van in Kalihi for a few months before ending up at IHS’ women’s shelter.

So she’s thankful that her new Nuuanu landlord took a chance on renting to her and her boys through Oahu Home Now.

“It is really important,” Ponochew said. “It’s for my kids.”

### LANDLORD ENGAGEMENT

For more information about becoming an Oahu Housing Now landlord:

>> **Email:** LEP@partners incareoahu.org

>> **Phone:** 336-7672

>> **Website:** [partnersincareoahu.org](http://partnersincareoahu.org)



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