

HAWAII NEWS

Kailua church and YMCA welcome homeless to aid

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Since January the Institute for Human Services has been operating a homeless drop-in center at the Kailua YMCA. Tami, wearing an orange hat, picked up supplies Tuesday that were prepackaged in plastic bags. She was helped by Denise Raia. Tami is especially grateful for the sunscreen.

For four months in a row now — on the fourth Tuesday of each month — 20 to 30 homeless people have found a hot shower, a safe and clean place to go to

the bathroom and a dozen or so agencies trying to help them survive life on the street in, of all places, the upscale, beachside community of Kailua.

“Eighty percent of our houseless clients are from right here,” said Leigh Ann Landreth, executive director of the YMCA of Honolulu, Windward branch. “They’re already here in our community.”

Landreth and the YMCA helped organize the monthly drop-in event at Kailua’s Daybreak Church next to the YMCA just off Pali Highway, with the help of the Institute for Human Services and funding from the Alexander & Baldwin and Harold K. Castle foundations.

A van with volunteers heads out once a month to pick up — and later return — homeless people who sleep at night along Kalama Beach, in the Kailua Beach Park pavilion, under bridges, in the brush of Kawainui Marsh and on the sidewalks and storefronts of Kailua town itself.

“This is not an urban problem,” Landreth said. “It’s an issue of human suffering.”

So what’s stopping people in bedroom communities like Hawaii Kai, Mililani and Manoa from also bringing together social workers and organizations to try to connect homeless people in their neighborhoods to services that could lead them into permanent homes?

Not a thing, Landreth said.

“People want to do something,” Landreth said. “They just don’t know what to do.”

Another church — St. Mary’s Episcopal Church on South King Street in Moiliili — also teamed up with IHS in March 2015 to launch its own monthly homeless drop-in center, which helped lay the groundwork for the startup operation in Kailua.

St. Mary’s Episcopal Church has a play-school on its grounds, just steps away from where homeless people are welcomed in once a month for a hot meal, clean clothes and help for issues such as reacquiring lost or stolen IDs, which prevents homeless people from getting jobs and permanent housing.

But last year’s 2017 Faith Summit on Homelessness helped more churches and faith-based groups realize they need to do more to make a difference in reducing Oahu’s high rate of homelessness beyond feeding people in parks. They realized they needed to tap into organizations such as IHS that specialize in housing and medical services to get people the help they need to actually move off of the street, said IHS spokesman Kimo Carvalho.

The Kailua drop-in center, like the one in Moiliili, is intended as a first step to get those on the Windward side into a shelter or, perhaps, even permanent housing.

After nearly three years on the beaches of Waimanalo and Kailua, Sean Tobin, 45, was just thankful for a hot shower.

With a new pair of donated shorts, T-shirts, socks and a belt in one arm, Tobin said he wanted to try to get a new ID, birth certificate and Social Security card.

But first Tobin could not wait to take a hot shower in the new Hiehie mobile hygiene center that gets towed onto the grounds of Daybreak Church each month.

Asked when he took his last hot shower, Tobin said, "Last month, right here."

"It means the biggest deal ever," Tobin said, anxious to get clean under warm water for the first time in a month. "It changes your outlook for the day. It changes your outlook for the week."

All of the services offered each month at St. Mary's Episcopal Church and now at Daybreak Church are intended to build trust between social workers and homeless people, who are often berated and shunned.

Eventually, if both sides are lucky, some homeless people may then be willing to take the next step and give up their lives of homelessness.

Laine Maeda, 56, was certainly considering his options as he enjoyed a plate of lasagna, meatballs and dinner rolls, surrounded by tables full of agencies offering help.

Maeda has been sleeping on Kalama Beach since a family dispute left him homeless in November, he said.

"Born and raised in Kailua," Maeda said. "Now I'm homeless."

Maeda knows the underlying reasons why — and said he is trying to get help.

"I'm a recovering addict and alcoholic," he said. "Been to rehab three times. And they discovered in 2006 that I have a mental illness. I'm bipolar. I can't maintain focus and a job. I'm getting help at Queen's (Medical Center). Queen's saved my life."

Maeda said he knows that the longer he stays on the street, the harder it will be to get out of homelessness.

So Maeda said that he appreciates that once a month, at least, he can show up at Daybreak Church and be around people willing to help.

“It’s good,” Maeda said. “It’s good that people care.”

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