

EDITORIAL

OUR VIEW

Editorial: DHHL must prove worthy of federal grants

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Announcements of intended cuts to federal programs, grants and funding have been issued so rapidly that it's hard to simply keep track, much less fight back against each hatchet blow. Unfortunately, the fight may be even tougher for the Native Hawaiian Housing Block Grants (NHHBG), because Hawaii and the grant program's sole beneficiary, the state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands (DHHL), have been too lax at planning for and using grant funds authorized over the past decades.

The Trump administration's Office of Management and Budget (OMB) has proposed eliminating the NHHBG program, come the next federal fiscal year starting Oct. 1. In a May 2 letter, OMB Director Russell Vought states that DHHL has not spent all grants previously awarded — and also questions whether the program, based in Hawaii only, should be funded by the feds at all.

OMB's suggestion that DHHL is failing to use the grant money is flawed: DHHL has committed to transforming its approach, openly embracing the use of NHHBG funds and expanding its development and assistance programs. But the poor reputation that DHHL has developed for execution of its mission — and since roughly 2008, for slow spending of block grant monies — is a real problem.



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Current DHHL director Kali Watson and Gov. Josh Green, who appointed Watson to the position, must vigorously defend continued block grant funding — by presenting federal authorities with strong evidence that plans for spending all monies allocated through the NHHBG program are firmly in place and will be carried out expeditiously.

The problem DHHL faces is laid bare by criticisms from Hawaii’s U.S. Rep. Jill Tokuda — who disagrees with the cuts, but also issued a statement saying DHHL needs to spend its past federal grant awards, faster.

Annual funding from the program in each of the last three years, since Watson took the DHHL helm, has been about \$22 million. DHHL presently has a \$53.6 million unspent grant funding balance — not including a \$22.3 million appropriation for the current fiscal year, Tokuda said.

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“These carryover balances, and these high annual reappropriations ... made it low-hanging fruit for the Trump administration,” Tokuda rightly said, adding, “I

know for beneficiaries it's extremely frustrating, because there's so much need." Also on the mark.

The NHHBG program was created in 2000, and until 2020, DHHL used the grants almost exclusively toward development of affordable single-family homes. But administration of the program went astray amid the housing market collapse of 2008 and ensuing recession, and has not been consistently on track since. And for Hawaiian households in need of housing aid, the bottom line was that much-needed assistance went unused, year after year.

President Barack Obama's administration zeroed out NHHBG funding in 2016 because DHHL was sitting on \$36 million in unspent block grant funds and on its \$9 million 2015 appropriation — at a time when more than 26,500 families were on the wait list for homesteads. In 2019, then-Gov. David Ige approved rules allowing DHHL to use grant money to offer rental housing to homestead-eligible Hawaiians. But expectations for DHHL performance really only rose after COVID-19, with the flow of federal aid funds that the pandemic triggered. The 2022 passage of Act 279, the "Waitlist Reduction Act," with \$600 million to expedite development of new Hawaiian homestead lots and housing, definitively changed the game — and upped needed pressure on DHHL to deliver.

Now, all eyes are on the agency. DHHL has developed and submitted plans as required for use of the block grants, and Tokuda affirms most of the funding will be spent in a matter of weeks — by the end of June. Further, she underscores that the feds have a trust responsibility to aid Hawaiians. But Watson's tepid statement that DHHL is "hopeful we can continue to receive the same level of funding" falls far short of a stirring defense of the agency.

DHHL must bring its detailed plans and accomplishments to the forefront, and fast, to counteract the funding threat and to sustain federal support of housing for Native Hawaiians.



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