

First transitional housing project for Native Hawaiians is underway

By Chloe Jones

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The first transitional housing project by the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands was blessed Monday, signifying the completion of a resource the agency hopes can be replicated throughout the islands.

Hale o Kumumamo, located on 91-1078 Yorktown St. in Kalaeloa, converted formerly vacant military housing into 18 studio apartments — two of them specially equipped for those with disabilities — with a kitchenette and a community laundry room and office space. Major funding for the project included \$6.4 million under the federal Native American Housing and Self Determination Act, known as NAHSDA, which provides funding for the development of culturally appropriate housing for indigenous populations.

Lehua Kinilau-Cano, the NAHSDA government relations program manager for the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands, told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser that someone's length of stay at Hale o Kumumamo will be determined on a case-by-case basis depending on the person's needs.

"You have to meet people where they are at," Kinilau-Cano said, noting that issues can be financial, mental health, substance abuse and anything in between. "Really work with them, find out what needs they have and provide services for their needs. The goal is to get them ultimately into a more permanent housing opportunity."

The Department of Hawaiian Homelands partnered with Kealahou West Oahu, which already manages transitional housing and other services for Oahu's unhoused population. The nonprofit will oversee and help manage the program at Kumumamo, and already has identified 18 people who are expected to move in by the end of January, Department of Hawaiian Home Lands spokesperson Diamond Badajos said.

Gov. Josh Green said the new project will provide "dignified housing" to individuals who were unhoused and on the Department of Hawaiian Home Lands homestead lease waitlist. He said the project fits into Prince Jonah Kuhio Kalaniana'ole's vision when he helped spearhead the Hawaiian Homes Commission Act in 1920.

"It recognizes that some people have a path that may be different and they start with stability, often in the beginning, to have a safe place just to sleep, to support, to heal and to rebuild their lives before, ultimately perhaps, they can reunite with their families and have permanent housing," Green said.

Green noted that the probability that someone who



Kahu Kordell Kekoa, right, presided over Monday's dedication of Hale o Kumumamo at Kalaeloa. Attendees at the blessing included, from left, Tommy Waters, U.S. Rep. Ed Case, Kali Watson, Gov. Josh Green, Sen. Mike Gabbard and Esther Kia'aina. PHOTOS BY GEORGE F. LEE / GLEE@STARADVERTISER.COM



Hale o Kumumamo has 18 studio apartments — two of them specially equipped for those with disabilities — with a kitchenette, as seen at left. Richard Medeiros, left, and U.S. Rep. Ed Case toured the units Monday as did state Rep. Darius Kila, below left, and Tanya Tehotu, right.

is unhoused is Native Hawaiian is two times higher than if they are from a different community, adding that this project focusing on housing Native Hawaiian descendants was “particularly special.”

Department of Hawaiian Home Lands Director Kali Watson said the project will be a place of safety, dignity and new beginnings for unhoused Hawaiians.

“Transitional housing is a critical piece of our housing continuum,” Watson said. “For beneficiaries experiencing housing insecurity, it can be the difference between falling behind — and in some cases even death — versus a real opportunity to move forward.”

U.S. Rep. Ed Case told the Star-Advertiser it has been particularly difficult to secure funding for programs that support Native Hawaiians and other indigenous populations under the Trump administration.

For the 2026 budget, for example, the Trump administration attempted to zero out funding for Native Hawaiians under NAHSDA, Case said, adding that he and his colleagues had to fight to get the law funded so that programs like Hale o Kumumamo could continue.

“There’s fundamental attacks on the programs themselves,” Case said, adding that this is the first time under any administration where there’s been such difficulty securing funding for Native Hawaiians. “There may have been differences in funding from year to year, but never zeroing it out. Never attempting to declare it unconstitutional.”

He said the attacks are not just on housing programs, but also on education, health and any other program that focuses on “leveling the playing field” through supporting indigenous populations.

State Sen. Mike Gabbard said the property Hale o Kumumamo is on was able to be restored and repurposed for transitional housing after being vacant for years. If the project is successful, the goal would be to replicate the project throughout the state using other vacant buildings.

The name “Kumumamo” combines the word “kumu,” meaning foundation or beginning, and “mamo,” which represents not only the bird or fish native to the area, but also “descendants,” Kinilau-Cano said.

“It’s not just a name, it’s the meaning,” she said. “I’m really feeling the heaviness — not in a negative way — but realizing there is still kuleana.”

For Kinilau-Cano, it’s personal. Her grandfather joined the homestead waitlist in 1951 and died before he could receive the opportunity for a homestead lease. Her father is in the process of taking her grandfather’s place in line.

“It’s deeply personal for me,” she said.

Kahu Kordell Kekoa, who blessed the new program, said he loved the name because place is important to Native Hawaiian culture, and places of transition can bring good memories and new opportunities. He asked attendees to think of their own places of transition as he led an untying of the maile lei ceremony.

“The building is not new but its purpose now is renewing, it’s refreshing and it brings new life,” he said in the blessing.

And with that, each person dipped their palm in rainwater and placed it on the building, honoring the new beginnings that soon will take place.



“Transitional housing is a critical piece of our housing continuum,” said Department of Hawaiian Home Lands Director Kali Watson, center. Watson was presented with a resolution by Sen. Mike Gabbard during Monday’s dedication of Hale o Kumumamo. The transitional housing, at top, is located at 91-1078 Yorktown St. PHOTOS BY GEORGE F. LEE / GLEE@STARADVERTISER.COM

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