

Keehi Lagoon shelter serves 500 homeless

The city's Provisional Outdoor Screening and Triage program was launched in April

By Nina Wu

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Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell said Thursday a shelter program at Keehi Lagoon Beach Park intended to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19 among the homeless population has served 500 people.

The city program — called the Provisional Outdoor Screening and Triage — was launched in April in response to the pandemic. It offers 24/7 shelter in tents at the park, where homeless individuals can self-quarantine.

POST is the continuation of an earlier program called Homeless Outreach and Navigation for Unsheltered Persons, run in partnership with the Honolulu Police Department because many officers encounter the homeless while responding to nuisance calls and can help get them into shelter. HPD was willing to step up and help the city find a solution for groups of homeless that would otherwise be living along Nimitz Highway, Caldwell said, or on the corner of Dillingham

Boulevard and King Street in difficult living conditions.

Of the nearly 500 homeless individuals who have been served at POST, roughly half went on to longer-term shelter programs, the city said. Roughly 30 were reunited with family, and about 20 moved to permanent housing.

At POST, homeless individuals are each given a care package, a campground site with a tent, multiple meals a day, snacks, water and access to solar power to charge electronic devices, according to HPD Lt. Joseph O'Neal.

They are screened and tested for COVID-19 upon intake, and separated into different groups based on clearance of a 15-day selfquarantine. Health providers, along with numerous nonprofit partners, social workers and officers, visit POST to provide services.

“These officers, they really pour their heart into this program,” said O’Neal. “We have officers here that provide meals for individuals from their families.”

On Sept. 1 the first positive COVID-19 case at POST was detected, and there have been seven since. All individuals who tested positive were moved off-site to receive medical care,

Caldwell said.

Currently, there are 89 homeless at the Keehi Lagoon site and 110 tents, according to HPD, but hundreds more are available. The typical length of stay is two weeks to a month, although some have stayed longer.

Staying at POST is voluntary, O’Neal said — anyone is free to leave at any time. If they return, however, they will need to be tested again for COVID-19 upon intake.

The program was set up using an estimated \$2.5 million in funds from the federal coronavirus relief package.

putting their own sweat equity into this program,” he said. “The other thing I think it does is it builds relationships with our homeless population who sometimes may look at the police department as a threat.”



The earlier HONU program, started by HPD Maj. Mike Lambert, was launched in December and offered short-term shelter at various city parks around Oahu while connecting people to needed services.

When the pandemic hit in March, POST aimed to provide 24/7 shelter for the overflow of homeless individuals who could not be accommodated at regular shelters due to new distancing guidelines.

At the time, Keehi Lagoon Beach Park was closed, and was chosen as the POST site where homeless could self-quarantine and receive services.

COVID-19 testing is conducted on-site several times a week, according to O'Neal.

In a 2020 Point-in-Time Count conducted in January, 4,449 people were experiencing homelessness on Oahu, with the most common self-reported causes listed as inability to pay rent, job loss and alcohol and drug use.

The state Health Department did not respond to a request for statistics on how many homeless individuals on Oahu have tested positive for COVID-19 to date.

Caldwell said Lambert and HPD officers have worked hard to make POST a success.

“It’s a testament to the officers, our men and women in blue, for their commitment and

Mayor Kirk Caldwell said Honolulu police have worked hard at making the POST program work. Above, he spoke Tuesday at a news conference.

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