

Inflatable structures unveiled to handle homelessness issues

By Dan Nakaso

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Hawaii's newest idea to reduce homelessness by quickly inflating portable structures to triage homeless people's issues went up to applause on the lawn next to the Honolulu Police Department Wednesday before it moves to Waipahu Culture Garden Park Friday night for no longer than 90 days.

As first reported by the Honolulu Star-Advertiser in October, city, state and nonprofit organizations are teaming up on a new, twopronged strategy that will simultaneously crack down on homeless-related violations within a 5-mile radius while directing homeless people into a temporary "navigation center" erected out of inflatable structures designed for military hospitals and first responders.

The idea is to offer a wide range of social services in the middle of Waipahu Cultural Garden Park at the newly named "Homeless Outreach and Navigation for Unsheltered Persons" — or HONU.

After 90 days — or less depending on the needs of the homeless population in Waipahu — the 10 inflatable, 400-square-foot structures likely will pop up next at Old Stadium Park, which has a persistent homeless population, Mayor Kirk Caldwell said at Wednesday's demonstration.

City Councilwoman Ann Kobayashi — whose district includes Old Stadium Park — has some concerns, especially the amount of space that will be needed for the HONU on the old Bowl-ODrome bowling alley side of the park.

"But it's only temporary," said Kobayashi, who got to see three of the inflatable structures Wednesday next to HPD headquarters. "Every community has to do its share to help with this problem."

Caldwell, who was born in Waipahu, said he expects to see the HONU concept at a park in his Manoa neighborhood, as well.

The idea is the brainchild of Honolulu Police Department Capt. Mike Lambert, who has become HPD's point person on homeless efforts. Caldwell called Lambert the "birth father" of the HONU concept.

"HPD stepped up in a big way here," Caldwell said.

Lambert, then an HPD lieutenant frustrated by HPD's tools to address



A news conference Wednesday on the lawn next to the Honolulu Police Department headquarters showcased an inflatable temporary shelter intended for the homeless. The conference provided an equipment preview for the Project Homeless Outreach and Navigation for Unsheltered Persons. A prayer is said in front of the newly inflated homeless shelter.

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homelessness, said he approached Chief Susan Ballard and said, “Chief, I’ve got a crazy idea.”

Ballard said she responded, “I loved it. Why not? Let’s go for it.”

Lambert previously told the Star-Advertiser that it’s the first concept of its kind in the nation.

The idea follows Caldwell’s philosophy of addressing homelessness through “compassionate disruption.”

HPD officers in plain clothes plan to use unmarked vehicles to drive homeless people into the HONU, where they will be housed and helped by social service agencies.

Caldwell called it “a light touch” by HPD.

Ballard was realistic in her HONU expectations Wednesday.

“This is not a silver bullet,” she said. “... But it is part of the solution.”

The neoprene, inflatable structures by Florida-based ZUMRO By Air Shelters USA are designed to be fire proof and water proof and able to withstand 55 mph winds and gusts of up to 75 mph.

Two ZUMRO employees used a compressor to inflate one in less than 3 minutes, to applause.

The structures have a warranty of three years and cost a total of \$6 million from state funds marked for homeless efforts.

Tommy Coates, ZUMRO’s western regional sales manager, said the structures are designed for mobile medical operations, police command posts and firefighter decontamination.

But Hawaii's interest in using the structures for homeless efforts has generated similar interest on the mainland, Coates said.

"This is really innovative for the homeless concept," he said.

Councilmembers Ann Kobayashi, left, and Ron Menor looked inside one of the personal space compartments that held a cot. They were touring the justinflated shelter, of which there are 10.

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