

Homeless seniors check out city-backed apartments

By Dan Nakaso

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Ten low-income, homeless seniors — most of whom are living in transitional shelters — got their first glimpse of their new studio apartments Thursday and proclaimed them “beautiful” and “nice.”

In all, 29 seniors who make \$42,200 or less — or 50% of Honolulu’s median income — will move into the newly renovated, threestory Kumu Wai building at the corner of Young and Artesian streets in McCully when it’s expected to open by the end of the year.

The monthly rent will be \$900 and comes with social service help.

Each resident will pay 30% of their gross income, or \$237 to \$347 per month, typically from their Social Security or disability payments. Housing vouchers will cover the rest of the rent.

The soon-to-be residents who toured their apartments Thursday included Fred Topasna, 66, who said it’s been “too long” since he had a place of his own; Neil Yamada, 58, and his mother, Janet Yamada, 82, who spent three years living in their 2006 Nissan Sentra in Kaneohe; and Karen Jones, 65, who is attending both Honolulu Community College and Leeward Community College in the hope of one day helping addicts such as herself.

Jones was already figuring out where she would put her bed and where she would study.



For a video on the city’s unveiling of low-income senior apartments, visit [star advertiser. com](http://staradvertiser.com).

“This is fantastic,” she said as she pictured herself living in one of the apartments.

The city bought the shell of a building intended for office space in November 2017 at a cost of \$6.3 million and budgeted \$5.037 million to renovate it into 30 studio apartments ranging in size from 150 to 230 square feet.

One of the apartments is reserved for a resident manager, and two of the larger ones were built for tenants with disabilities.

The renovation work came in \$237,000 under budget.

Each apartment comes with a private kitchen and bathroom. There are two outdoor lanai, laundry facilities on each floor and 22 ground-level parking stalls underneath Kumu Wai.

Mayor Kirk Caldwell, at a ceremony on one of the building’s lanai, called it “a very blessed day. ... It’s about helping find our kupuna a place to live.”

Each of the first 10 future residents wore kukui nut lei, which Caldwell said symbolizes “light and hope, caring and love.”

Councilwoman Ann Kobayashi, whose district includes the new Kumu Wai building, and Councilman Ron Menor said separately that there is a desperate need for more affordable units for seniors who are either homeless or on the verge of becoming homeless.

Scott Morishige, the state's homeless coordinator, said projects such as Kumu Wai will help "one of the most vulnerable segments of our homeless population."

Many of the future tenants have been chronically homeless for as long as 20 years and have been unable to find housing at any price.

Some are estranged from their families or have no families.

One is on probation, has bad credit and mental health issues and is battling cancer. Another is a convicted sex offender, has bad credit and has been denied housing because of his criminal record. Another is on welfare, has diabetes and is also being treated for cancer.

After a blessing, lei untying and photos, future resident Helen Laiot, 65, thanked everyone — builders, architects, city and state officials — as she toured the new apartments.

"It's really good. I'm really happy," Laiot said as she moved from apartment to apartment. "Thank you, guys. Thank you."

At top, kahu Kordell Kekoa, left, officiated the blessing ceremony Thursday as the maile lei was untied for Janet Yamada and her son Neil Yamada, center.

City officials unveiled their new McCully apartments, at left, for homeless senior citizens.

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