

State must lead on housing crisis

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The state last year took a necessary step toward addressing Hawaii's appalling shortage of affordable housing for its neediest citizens and the intractable problem of chronic homelessness with an infusion of \$200 million for the construction of subsidized rentals.

What should be clear to state leadership is that, as large as this allotment was, it was so many years overdue that it was only the first step down a road to recovery that is now very, very long.

Advocates for housing the state's low-income and marginalized residents are afraid that it's not clear. That's why a group of them gathered at the state Capitol on Monday in hopes of reminding legislators of their responsibility to keep the spotlight on housing, and give its further development its rightful share of the budget.

Gov. David Ige should be out in front of this campaign. He might point to things his administration has been doing quietly but, frankly, the mission could use a leader giving direction to legislators, and at full volume. Elected representatives with control of the state budget need to be rallied to the cause, and now is the time.

The groups included Bridging the Gap and Partners in Care, who aimed to raise awareness about a package of nine bills that would advance the fight against homelessness on two fronts.

One important element is to provide the funds for staffing of psychologists, attorneys and other professionals needed to implement a law to get more of the chronically homeless into treatment.

The Assisted Community Treatment Act allows a person to petition Family Court to order a family member suffering from mental illness or substance abuse into treatment. It's critical that lawmakers finally put the financial muscle behind the 2013 law, and passing Senate Bill 567 would help accomplish that.

The nonprofit has tracked the state's housing shortage; already it was described as a looming "crisis" more than 40 years ago, Thornton said.

The failure to deal with the housing shortage in any meaningful way has led to Hawaii's current dire straits, in which the islands have the highest percapita homelessness rate in the nation.

The most dire aspect may be the plight of the chronically homeless. Advocates rightly are lobbying for some special focus to be placed on the need for "permanent supportive housing."

These are the kind of subsidized rentals in which tenants are first given the critical stability of safe, decent housing. What's better known as "Housing First" programs also provide "wrap-around" services to help address the mental health and substance abuse problems of the newly housed, right on the spot.

Advocates have pushed for another significant outlay on the order of \$200 million, with \$75 million set aside for permanent supportive housing. Recent downward adjustments in the state's projected tax revenues, however, have made that objective a bit more elusive.

Regardless, this is not an initiative that can be put on idle, lest the state continue to lose ground. Hawaii is increasingly a place where a large segment of its workforce, predominantly occupying low-paying service-industry jobs, simply can't afford basic living expenses without help.

Simply put, the state must be the dominant partner in providing affordable housing opportunities, but has already lost too much time to stem the crisis.

Other pending legislation, which also should not be allowed to fall between the cracks, would attempt to provide funds narrowing the gap in the stock of affordable rentals, said Gavin Thornton, co-executive director of the Hawai'i Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice.