

Promising Practices

Using Kauhale Communities to Support People Experiencing Homelessness in Hawaii

Individuals experiencing homelessness is a major issue nationwide, particularly in areas with high costs of living. In Hawaii, in addition to the high cost of living, there is a lack of permanent housing and emergency shelter beds, and a difficulty in recruiting and retaining staff to work as service providers. To address the issue of homelessness, in 2023, the Hawaii State Legislature appropriated funds to support kauhale; “kauhale” is a Hawaiian word that refers to modest housing units for individual households that include shared spaces for restrooms, dining and gathering. The concept comes from indigenous Hawaiian housing structures, with an emphasis on housing that functions as a “village” with space for communal living. One key aspect of kauhale is the idea that each person is integral to the functioning of the community as a whole, with community members having their own kuleana, or responsibility, to pitch in with communal tasks such as cooking, cleaning, gardening or taking care of elders. [The governor’s administration](#) is working to establish 12 kauhale communities over the next three years, with six on Oahu, and two each in Hawaii, Maui and Kauai counties. The intention is for these communities to function as just that, communities, where residents rely on and support one another.

Support for Unhoused Veterans



In 2021, the first kauhale project, [Kama’oku](#), launched in Kalaeloa on Oahu. The project contains 10 tiny home units for unhoused veterans and 26 for unhoused civilians. Community spaces include open-air cabanas, a commercial kitchen and event gathering spaces. Kama’oku sits on land owned by the Hawaii Public Housing Authority, but the community itself is run by [U.S. VETS](#).

The kauhale community, which is located across the street from a U.S. VETS facility, ensures residents living in Kama’oka receive case management, housing and employment assistance, onsite medical care and therapy. [The U.S. VETS facility](#) offers veterans transitional, long term and permanent housing; workforce development opportunities; and individualized support, including for mental health and other wellness needs.

Hawaii’s Medical Respite Villages

Many individuals experiencing homelessness do not receive routine medical care, so by the time they do access health care, it is often for acute incidents treated in emergency rooms. [Pūlama Ola, pictured right](#), was a tiny house medical respite village in Honolulu that received patients upon discharge from the hospital or ER. [Medical respite](#) refers to short-term residential care that allows individuals experiencing homelessness a space to recover and receive needed support. [According to a local newspaper article](#), emergency room care for an unhoused individual costs the state \$82,000 per year; the creation of medical respite centers could reduce this cost by 73 percent a year.

Photo by Hawaii News Now





Pūlama Ola, meaning “to cherish life,” was the state’s first kauhale for unhoused individuals leaving hospitals. This pilot project, which ended in mid-December 2023, served people released from hospital inpatient beds and those discharged from the emergency room without anywhere else to go. Consisting of 10 tiny homes situated in the parking lot of the Department of Health, the community provided staff around the clock for intake, supervision and care. The project was managed by [Project Vision Hawaii](#), which provided registered nurses for daily rounds and a mobile hygiene unit for individuals to take hot showers or use the restroom. One key component of this model was its drop-in center; residents, as well as neighbors, could drop into [Pūlama Ola](#) to receive supportive services and case management, or to speak to the psychologist who visited once a week. Anyone could use these services and resources, whether they were unhoused or not. Through the state’s first medical-legal partnership, Project Vision Hawaii could refer individuals to a local law firm and sponsor all legal costs. The all-encompassing idea was and is a community and person-centered holistic approach to wellness and health, with resources and services available in a “one-stop shop.”

Even though residents could stay as long as they needed, Pūlama Ola was designed for temporary medical stays. In January 2024, Project Vision Hawaii will open two new kauhale communities on Oahu, each with around 30 tiny homes. For the new communities, Project Vision Hawaii staff want to emphasize that these communities can be individuals’ forever homes, should they choose to stay. Both of the new kauhale communities will continue the medical respite model, but with the option and ability for residents to stay long-term as part of the community; additionally, the drop-in center component will continue. One of the two

communities is specifically for clients with behavioral health issues that may prohibit them from qualifying for other types of housing. Importantly, Project Vision Hawaii is committed to low-barrier housing, with harm reduction practices as a core component of any kauhale location. Additionally, Project Vision Hawaii has been running a homeless shelter on Maui since the Maui wildfires in August 2023; in February 2024, a medical respite village will open, with construction for the permanent kauhale community anticipated for phase one completion in mid-2024.



Across the country, tiny homes have been utilized to help support individuals experiencing homelessness, with projects serving youth, veterans or other specific populations in need. Although kauhale can include tiny homes, as evidenced by the communities described above, it refers to a broader paradigm of community and can include multi-family dwellings and apartments. Hawaii’s kauhale communities provide more than a place to sleep for unhoused individuals; these projects foster community and interconnectedness, all while providing access to needed social services, care and support.

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