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It's time to step it up on public housing

By Victor Geminiani

Imagine coming home from the hospital and having to be carried up the stairs because the elevators are down in your 16-story building — for the third time this week. How about having to use a portable toilet in your living room because the only bathroom in the home is on the second floor and you are in a wheelchair.

Disabled tenants at Kuhio Park Terrace and Kuhio Homes have to worry every day about meeting their most basic needs, but after years of suffering, they have new hope it's about to change.

Last week, tenants at KPT and Kuhio Homes filed federal and state class-action lawsuits against the Hawai'i Public Housing Authority for its continuous failure to comply with federal laws mandating fair treatment for disabled residents and to remedy the substandard living conditions they are forced to endure every day. After years of neglect, the complexes are so severely deteriorated that the list of horrible conditions is almost endless.

The story about the deterioration of public housing is not new to anyone who lives in Hawai'i. Frequent news reports describe deteriorating conditions throughout the HPHA's housing stock. It is time that we begin to deal more effectively with the challenges before us and provide minimally humane, affordable housing for the residents of our public housing system. There are at least four components of a successful plan to meet that goal.

The first is establishing a stable, quality-oriented management team to lead the HPHA. During the past seven years, the HPHA has had five executive directors — almost the same number of directors it had over the first 50 years of its existence. Without stable management, you will never have positive, long-term change. It's time to de-politicize the position.

The second is a commitment by both the legislative and executive branches of government to fund a plan to make the critical capital improvements required by federal, state and county law. Through the years, the state has spent far less than was required to maintain safe and sanitary conditions in many of the HPHA housing projects.

By its own admission, the HPHA will need at least \$600 million to complete the backlog of needed renovations. This sum is not likely to be met with the anticipated budgetary constraints. Part of the answer will lie in allocating sufficient funding over the next several years to make a significant impact on the worst of the conditions.

The rest of the answer will depend on our ability to think creatively to explore opportunities to find capital for additional improvements. One impressive model exists in Palolo Valley, where the nonprofit affordable housing program Mutual Housing was able to restore 230 units of dilapidated housing by transitioning the project into a Section 8 voucher program. This created a significantly increased federal revenue support for the units and made rehabilitation possible.

The third is establishing significantly higher standards of performance for those who are responsible for ensuring adherence to the requirements of federal and state laws as well as HPHA policies. Managers who consistently underperform must be sanctioned and fired. Replacements should have convincing track records for high-quality performance and a healthy sensitivity to the importance of establishing strong and trustful relationships with the projects' tenants.

The fourth is establishing and supporting productive resident associations. Although strongly

encouraged by federal regulation, the HPHA has less than 20 functioning resident counsels out of its 85 housing projects.

The HPHA and its local management staff must appreciate and encourage the creation of a solid partnership with tenants in each of its projects.

Tenants must respect the need to keep their apartments and all common areas free of improper use that will impinge on their neighbor's enjoyment of their own apartments. A vibrant, well-led and trained residents' counsel can deliver that message more effectively than project managers.

Most people in Hawai'i today agree that safe and affordable housing is our most pressing problem. It is a requirement of our morality as a people, as reflected by our laws, that conditions like those that exist at KPT and Kuhio Homes not become an acceptable bottom line as an answer to our state's critical shortage of affordable shelter.

Fixing the systemic problems with our public housing is not just for the poor and disabled, it's for the health and well-being of our entire Island community.

Victor Geminiani is executive director of Lawyers for Equal Justice, which has filed federal and state class-action lawsuits against the Hawai'i Public Housing Authority. He wrote this commentary for The Advertiser.
