

## OPINION

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## State must live up to public housing safety goals

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Among the responsibilities of state government is to help provide basic needs for citizens' whose own means fall short. Where shelter is concerned, the state acknowledges this through its public housing projects.

ADVERTISEMENT While it's a practical impossibility for the state to meet completely the housing demand for the needy, it's certainly duty-bound to keep what it does provide in safe, livable condition.

It's beyond dispute that the state has welched on that duty for decades.

Recent lawsuits filed on behalf of Kuhio Park Terrace and Kuhio Homes tenants brought this shameful failing back into the headlines, but the tales of woe about public housing have predated those court actions by many years.

In 1991, the state auditor excoriated housing authorities for the lack of maintenance and repairs at public housing projects statewide. The last time an assessment was done, in 2003, the cost of fixes and upkeep at the state- and federally funded housing projects over a 30-year span was estimated at \$1 billion, including replacing dilapidated sewer lines and fixing structural problems.

At KPT alone, the bill for needed improvements was toted up to \$67 million. The problems cited most commonly are the lack of hot water during most of the day, sewer-line backups and elevator breakdowns.

These are not cosmetic flaws but potentially real threats to health and safety. They certainly aren't characteristic of housing that can be called livable by anyone's definition.

The degradation of the public housing stock dates back to the early 1980s, when the states took over primary oversight for public housing nationwide. Some really aged facilities, such as KPT, were handicapped further because they were designed before federal laws were passed requiring that disabled tenants be accommodated adequately. Such renovations are costly.

So the state made plans to demolish both KPT and Mayor Wright Housing and replace them with mixed-use complexes deemed to be more successful models for public housing than the densely packed units and high rises favored 40 or 50 years ago. They deferred many repairs in hopes of receiving a federal grant for the redevelopment, a policy that proved unwise when those grant applications failed.

Razing and replacing the derelict projects should remain the long-range goal, but conditions are now so bad that stop-gap repairs are critical, especially to bring projects into compliance with federal fair-housing provisions accommodating the disabled.

The state Public Housing Authority is belatedly playing catch-up, with elevator replacement projects among nearly two dozen projects in the governor's \$1.86 billion construction stimulus plan.

That's a good start, but so much more needs to be done. Clearly, public-housing repairs deserve funds when the Obama administration and Congress launch a federal stimulus package.







A broken and hazardous garbage chute is just one of the problems that prompted class-action lawsuits over conditions at Kuhio Park Terrace and Kuhio Homes. The state has a duty to keep its housing projects in a safe, livable condition.

GREGORY YAMAMOTO | The Honolulu Advertiser

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To that end, Gov. Linda Lingle has submitted \$34.7 million in public housing requests, and the congressional delegation needs to fight to keep those high on the list.

The state also must revisit its own relationship with the management companies that supervise public housing. Residents and managers share responsibility for the integrity of the facilities, and a healthy relationship of trust between tenants and landlord agents needs to be re-established, and the most capable company chosen for the job.

To get to that point, though, the state first must see that its tenants are safely housed. That would be the bottom line for any landlord.

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