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Storm shelters for ill pitched to Legislature

A Civil Defense official says the state needs special facilities for seniors and the infirm

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Hawaii needs special hurricane shelters to cope with elderly, medically frail and disabled people, disaster preparedness officials told two legislative committees yesterday.

That is in addition to the needed 124,000 shelter spaces across the state, said Ed Teixeira, vice director of state Civil Defense.

In September, Teixeira and others asked the House committees on Health and on Public Safety and Military Affairs to spend \$35 million over four years to retrofit more schools and public buildings as emergency shelters.

Yesterday, Teixeira said some of that money needs to be directed at establishing "special-needs" shelters.

"Detailed planning and resources with a focus on the special-needs population are lacking," he said.

The Health Department can help with planning by providing information about those groups, which includes people in adult residential care homes, special treatment facilities, therapeutic living, assisted-living and mental health programs, said Dr. Chiyome Fukino, state health director.

The Health Department is aware of about 12,000 people in those circumstances, according to Fukino.

Many of the 219 hurricane shelters now designated by state Civil Defense do not have backup power generators or handicapped accessibility, noted Maria Lutz, disaster planner for the American Red Cross. Most of the shelters are schools that have been retrofitted to withstand hurricane-force winds.

"We see a need for a new class of shelter," Lutz said, with features beyond a standard shelter but not as intensive as a hospital.

While the state's hospitals are highly prepared for emergencies, they need more "hardening" of their buildings to ensure that they can withstand a hurricane themselves, said Toby Clairmont, emergency program manager for the Healthcare Association of Hawaii, which represents hospitals and nursing

homes. Hospitals need to stay focused on treating the seriously ill and not fall into becoming shelters themselves, Clairmont said.

When Clairmont was working in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, he said he saw instances of people who died because they could not get their dialysis treatments. Special-needs shelters could be lifesavers for people like that, he said.

Lutz said it would be helpful if the state offered tax incentives to facilities like long-term care homes that strengthen their buildings. That would enable them to keep residents there in the event of a hurricane, instead of them having to move to a shelter, she said.

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