

Volunteers vital to tsunami cleanup efforts | West Hawaii Today

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BY CAROLYN LUCAS-ZENK | WEST HAWAII TODAY

Heavy equipment, tools and tenacity were prevalent Thursday in West Hawaii, where volunteers banded together with government employees to clean up tsunami debris.

Hawaii Rocks and Pineapple Custom are helping the state Division of Boating and Ocean Recreation remove wreckage off Kailua Pier, as well as out of Kamakahonu and Kaiakeakua bays. Kamakahonu Bay fronts Kamehameha's Kona Beach Hotel while Kaiakeakua Bay is on the other side of the pier.

The businesses began donating their time, equipment, labor and expertise Saturday. Their reason was simple.

"Something needed to be done, and we're in the area," said Kapono Benson, Hawaii Rocks owner.

Jeff Newton, DOBOR maintenance supervisor, said the help from the two companies is "invaluable." He also gave accolades to Kona resident Rocky Campbell, who voluntarily operated a forklift and helped re-establish the security area used by cruise ship operations.

Since Friday, DOBOR employees have been working nonstop at Kailua Pier. They have removed more than 6 tons of debris, gutted the visitor center, replaced electric panels, re-erected barricades, addressed safety hazards and restored lighting, Newton said.

The goal is to try to open the comfort station by Saturday and have everything back in place at the pier by Wednesday, Newton said.

Meanwhile, more than 100 residents, visitors, students and local businesses painted picnic tables, as well as cleaned poles, railings and walls in the main pavilion at Kahaluu Beach Park. Volunteers also helped remove trash from a fish pond and pile rocks for walls.

"We came out to serve and show love in a tangible way. Today is all about doing what we can to make an impact and be a blessing," said Amy Provencher, mission builder for University of the Nations. "We're here because we care about Kona and the people here."

Keauhou resident Alice Walker participates in the Reef Teach Program, which educates visitors and residents on how to protect coral and marine life at Kahaluu Bay. She was "glad to pitch in and help where needed" Thursday.

The Kohala Center led this cleanup. The not-for-profit academic institute for research and education in the environmental sciences has facilitated community-driven efforts aimed at protecting Kahaluu Bay since 2006, said Cindi Punihaole, the center's outreach and volunteer coordinator.

"It's important for us to help. Seeing the aftermath here was devastating," Punihaole said. "Though this is a sad time, it's also an opportunity to restore the park together as a community and in a pono way."

Deac deCamp, West Hawaii District superintendent for the county Department of Parks and Recreation, said the dedication of volunteers is a critical part of a community's emergency response and recovery. On behalf of the county, he repeatedly thanked volunteers for their energy and efforts Thursday.

Around 5:15 a.m. March 11, deCamp was busy assessing Kahaluu Beach Park. He watched the

first waves hit and transform the beach into a lake. At one point, he could not see the north pavilion because it was covered by water.

Strong surges deposited 5 to 6 feet of rocks from the bay over a wall and next to the north pavilion, which is now closed and needs a new roof and repairs to its foundation. The waves scattered telephone booths, picnic tables, signs, barricades and debris throughout the park, as well as toppled rock walls and created 4-foot craters off the sidewalk. The integrity of the north comfort station's pad is also compromised, deCamp said.

Since Saturday, county employees have put in more than 600 hours restoring the area.

Kahaluu Beach Park is open, but the public is asked to respect areas that are closed for their safety, deCamp said.

County Civil Defense Administrator Quince Mento said county property sustained up to \$562,000 in damage during the tsunami. The largest portion of that -- an estimated \$300,000 to \$500,000 -- was for road repair work on Alii Drive, Mento said.

The Parks and Recreation Department reported \$41,000 in damage to county parks, including cleanup costs and damage to items in the parks. A Department of Environmental Management pump station sustained \$20,000 in damage, and a broken water pipe at Keauhou Pier cost about \$1,000, Mento said.

Since last weekend, retired Kona police officer Peter Alu said he and more than 100 volunteers have hauled 60 large truck loads of debris from Kealakekua Bay. A major accomplishment Wednesday was the removal of a sunken home's roof.

He said an unknown crew aboard a boat tied ropes around the roof and pulled it close to shore. Using crowbars and chain saws, volunteers then broke the roof into pieces and disposed of it.

Alu and other organizers are looking for donations and volunteers to help remove the remaining debris from the bay and shoreline Saturday and Sunday. Those interested in contributing should meet near the Napoopoo Beach Park pavilion around 9 a.m. For more information, call Alu at 328-8775.

WHT Reporter Erin Miller contributed to this article.

clucas-zenk@westhawaiiitoday.com