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Yukimura's disaster role wins praise

□ But some critics see it as a test of her political future

By Gregg K. Kakesako
and David Oshiro
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LIHUE — As Kauai Mayor JoAnn Yukimura biked to work earlier this week, Garden Isle residents showed their determination by flashing the "shaka" sign.

Her bike commute was a symbolic effort to help boost Kauai's sagging morale following the state's most devastating storm, Hurricane Iniki.

For Yukimura, who has had more than her share of political detractors, her handling of the hurricane's disaster relief and recovery efforts will be the prime test of this administration.

Yukimura, 42, a Democrat, isn't up for re-election this year. She had served four terms on the County Council where her advocacy for slow growth during the resort-development boom in the 1970s and 80s earned her a lot of enemies.

Gerardo: Out of major decisions

The only public complaint of Yukimura's performance so far has been from a member of her own Cabinet — Civil Defense Director Sonny Gerardo.

Gerardo told a reporter that he was left out of major decision-making before Iniki hit last week.

He said it was inappropriate for people who were not usually involved in the planning operation to be in the Civil Defense office at the time.

Gerardo declined to elaborate, saying he would provide more details at a later date.

When asked about Gerardo's comments, Yukimura bristled. "Please, we're trying to handle a crisis," she said, and then she walked away.

Tom Batey, the mayor's administrative assistant since June, said Gerardo was never cut out.

"He is an integral part of the planning process. He is down there now," pointing to the emergency Civil Defense shelter in the basement of the County Building.

'That wahine sincerely cares . . .'

Big Island Civil Defense Director Harry Kim acknowledged that he has heard criticism that Yukimura is "too involved, too much of a taskmaster and gets in the way."

But Kim said: "I take that criticism as a compliment for now. Every complaint that comes in, she has hopped on it."

"That wahine sincerely cares that the job gets done. . . . There always will be Monday-morning quarterbacking."

Kim, whose 17 years with Civil Defense has included work at Mount St. Helens, said he gives Yukimura an "A" for the way she and her administration have handled the disaster.

Both Kim and Col. Ed Correa, ground troop commander of the more than 1,000 Hawaii Army and Air National Guard soldiers and airmen, pointed to the quick response by various federal, state and county agencies in only five days.

Correa said Yukimura has "got her finger on the pulse of the community. She's focused. She knows what the community needs. She doesn't micro-manage. It's a shared and participatory style of management."

"When a situation arises, she says go fix it."

Federal assistance centers open

Five federal disaster assistance centers opened this morning on Kauai.

Debra Carvalho, a mother of three from Hanamaulu, was one of the first people to use the new center in the Kauai War Memorial Convention Hall, which is also being used as an emergency shelter.

She said she needs clothing and bedding for her children. She said they lost the roof over her children's bedroom, and Hurricane Iniki left everything there soaked.

In addition, the hurricane winds blew out the windshield of her car, and she's hoping to get assistance to replace the car, which she said is now useless.

A car, Carvalho said, is a necessity. She needs it to take her children to school, which opens on Monday.

"I hope I can get my car running, or a new one, because it's the only way I have of getting around," she said.

Carvalho said she's also seeking medical care for her children, who are suffering from bronchitis, asthma and other respiratory ailments.

Seeking unemployment benefits

Wailua Homestead resident Josephine Scalzo, a former Westin Kauai employee, was standing in line to file for unemployment benefits.

She was laid off Monday because of the hurricane.

"I'm a single parent, with two kids in college and a mortgage. I don't know what I'm going to do now," she said.

Norma Jean Trask, operations manager at the convention hall center, said she's been serving 600 to 700 hot breakfasts a day, about 1,000 lunches and 700 to 800 dinners.

"And the numbers are increasing by the hours," Trask said.