

West Hawaii Today

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Free preparedness help available online

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Why aren't Hawaii residents better prepared for hurricanes, floods, earthquakes and tsunamis?

The authors of a new handbook on how home-owners can protect their property have a few answers to that question.

First, said Dennis Hwang, an affiliate faculty member of the University of Hawaii's Sea Grant College Program, is the notion many Hawaii residents have that serious hurricanes only strike Kauai, or that earthquakes will only cause damage on the Big Island. Residents who survived Hurricane Iniki or the October 2006 earthquakes with minimal damage also believe they are prepared to endure worse disaster, Hwang said.

"There are a lot of justifications why homeowners won't act," he said.

The Homeowner's Handbook to Prepare for Natural Hazards, which can be downloaded for free from the Sea Grant Web site at <http://www.soest.hawaii.edu/SEAGRANT/communication/publications.php>, covers 11 myths island residents have about the likelihood of natural disasters striking. The guide goes on to dispel those ideas, including one that strengthening and retrofitting a house is too expensive and not worth the homeowner's effort.

Hwang and co-author Darren Okimoto, UH Sea Grant extension leader, give specific instructions for installing hurricane clips, roof braces and plywood window coverings.

That kind of detail is what sets the guide apart from other hazard preparedness guides, Hwang said.

"It puts it in a form the average homeowner could understand," he said. "Some guides tell you to cover your windows with plywood. This one tells you what kind of plywood to buy, how to measure it, what screws to buy."

The book also covers "continuous load path connection," a series of connections from roof to foundation to better hold together the structure. Hwang said he tried to take technical and scientific explanations and put them in simple terms that regular readers can understand, though some of the work described may still need to be completed by licensed contractor, structural engineer or architect.

For homeowners who think they can't afford to prepare their house for a natural disaster, the guide notes the state's loss mitigation grant, which will reimburse homeowners for a third of the cost of upgrades, up to \$2,100. Additional information about those grants is available at <http://www.hurricaneretrofits.hawaii.gov>. It also points out possible tax credits and insurance discounts for some home improvements.

The four major hazards -- earthquakes, tsunami, hurricanes and floods -- are defined and the types of destruction they can bring are described, with a combination of scientific information and historical examples. An earthquake in Hawaii County, for instance, could generate a tsunami that would hit Big Island shores in five minutes, Maui in 15 minutes, Oahu in 25 minutes and Kauai in 40 minutes, according to the guide. Photos, graphics and tables show the paths, amount of damage and aftermath of several hurricanes, and estimate what might have happened had some of those storms turned toward the island chain a few hours earlier than they did.

Also included in the 108-page guide are tips for preparing emergency supply and evacuation kits, which is the one measure residents are most likely to have already taken, Hwang said.

"A lot of these are simple things," he said, adding that following the recommendations can have a variety of benefits. "Your house protects the homeowner and family from the elements. (If the house is sound and the supplies are available), they may be able to stay in the house during a hurricane instead of a shelter."