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About 20 sight-impaired women received basic self defense training yesterday from Hawaii Jujitsu Kodenkai at the Daijingu Temple in Nuuanu. Dojo member Todd Fukunaga helped Laureen Kukino learn how to break a choke hold.

Blind women praise self-defense class

The first of its kind offered by the state, the session may be repeated for men

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The police officer's advice to a class of blind and sight-impaired women was well-intentioned. But it wasn't very useful.

"The best way to avoid an attack," Alan Hatakenaka of the state Department of Human Services remembers the officer telling the group, "is to always be on the lookout for suspicious people."

If you're blind, that's pretty hard to do.

So Hatakenaka, the orientation and mobility specialist at the state branch aimed at helping blind people become independent, decided to put together a martial arts self-

defense class for blind and sight-impaired women.

It's the first of its kind offered by the state, and about 20 women showed up for the four-hour class in Nuuanu Valley yesterday, learning how to get free of a choke hold, smash an attacker's face against a wall and fend off an assault while standing, sitting or lying down.

It was so popular, Hatakenaka said, that there's talk of offering the class regularly, and to men.

"You don't need sight," said martial arts instructor Steve McLaughlin, who regularly teaches self-defense classes for women. "You're not learning self-defense. You're learning assault prevention."

The program participants, who ranged in age from their teens to late 60s, practiced on mats in the basement of the Daijingu Temple. Each was assigned a martial arts student, who guided them through moves. Four guide dogs sat to the side of the room, looking on with curious glances and tilted heads.

About halfway through the class, Landa Phelam giggled triumphantly after sitting on her student-instructor's feet and grabbing his ankles, making him fall backward with a loud thump.

The 66-year-old, who sees only blurred shapes and colors, said the class not only gave her the skills to ward off an attacker, but boosted her self-confidence and self-esteem.

"I go all over the island," Phelam said after taking a sip of water during a break. "I used to feel vulnerable."

Hatakenaka said the self-defense class proves that blindness doesn't have to be a barrier. "Although they may be blind, they can still succeed," he said. "They can still lead a normal life."

Charmain Birchard is blind in one eye and has poor sight in the other.

During a break yesterday, she sat with a friend to chat and snack on chips. When the instructor called for the students to return to the mat, the 36-year-old jumped up enthusiastically and hurried to her spot.

"It's rather a different viewpoint of martial arts than what you see in the movies," she said, laughing.