

**PROTECT
PUBLIC HEALTH**

**REVIVE
THE ECONOMY**

**STRENGTHEN
OUR COMMUNITY**

CAPITOL CONNECTION

DECEMBER 2020

'Tis the season to mask up, stay vigilant and hopeful

It's true this holiday season in Hawai'i will be like no other. The pandemic continues to impact our health, our jobs and our way of life, with challenging times still ahead. But there are glimmers of hope: Most people here are still masking up, a vaccine is on the horizon and our COVID-19 case numbers are among the lowest in the nation. Governor Ige and his team want everyone to know how important it is — now more than ever — to stay vigilant. Let's take care of each other and our community as we face the new year together — with hope.



Chelei Kahalewai and her aunt in DOH's "How to Gather. For Real." campaign.

Q. Heading into the holidays, what do you want people to know about the progress we've made on COVID-19?

A. Hawai'i currently has the lowest incidence of COVID-19 in the nation because people have been taking precautions. This year we have to do the holidays differently, especially with cases surging on the mainland. The new cluster reports from the state Department of Health help us understand the kinds of in-person activities that spread the virus when we let down our guard around family and friends. People have more control over the virus than they think if they just limit their interactions, wear their masks, wash their hands and watch their distance.

Q. Why was a clearer statewide mask mandate needed?

A. People needed to know they must wear a mask when they are out in public. We have had a mask mandate since April, but now the explicit language for the exceptions is the same from county to county. Businesses wanted us to add that they can refuse service to someone who doesn't wear a mask, unless an exception applies. The 15th emergency proclamation also requires all hotel operators statewide to have their own COVID-19 health and safety plan so they're prepared in case someone becomes symptomatic and tests positive for the virus.

Q. What gives you confidence in the state's plans to distribute a COVID-19 vaccine?

A. In talks with other governors and our federal partners, it's clear to me that we have a higher sense of community in Hawai'i. We understand it's important that we work together, especially when we're trying to vaccinate thousands of people across the state in a short period of time. We learned some valuable things from the surge COVID-19 testing about coordinating with the counties. We governors are cautiously optimistic that the federal government will provide the funding needed to distribute the vaccine, so we need to be ready.

Q. What is your reaction to the outcome of the presidential election and President Trump's allegations of election fraud?

A. It's unfortunate that President Trump attacks the election process with no basis to question it. Free and fair elections are such an important part of our democracy. At least Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will be working to bring the country together. President Trump's refusal to concede the election isn't helpful, especially when there's no evidence of fraud.

Q. How are you and the First Lady celebrating the holidays safely?



A. The challenge with this pandemic is that we've all had to sacrifice time with our families and friends. Two of our children are coming home, but we've told them they should isolate for 14 days and pre-test before arriving in Hawai'i and that they can't socialize with all their friends when they're here. Our other daughter, a nurse in Washington state, just learned all leaves at her clinic were cancelled because they're short-staffed. For the rest of our relatives, we'll have to celebrate virtually.

Statewide mask mandate clarified in 15th proclamation

Governor Ige has issued a 15th COVID-19 emergency proclamation that extends and clarifies the statewide mask mandate as agreed to by all four counties and the state. The proclamation reads: “All individuals shall wear face coverings over their noses and mouths when in public settings.” The few exceptions listed in Exhibit J of the proclamation are now uniform across all islands. It was also noted that a face covering mandate has been in place in the state since April 25 when the governor signed the sixth emergency proclamation.

The 15th emergency proclamation also specifies that “an owner or operator of any business or operation shall refuse admission or service to any individual who fails to wear a face covering, unless an exception applies.” Those who do not may be subject to enforcement, including fines and mandatory closure. In addition, the proclamation now requires all hotel operators in the state to adopt a COVID-19 Health and Safety Plan for each property. It also makes clear that it is the responsibility of the hotel operator to accommodate guests (on or off site) who become COVID-19 positive or have been identified as a close contact of someone who is COVID-19 positive. Hotel operators are required to submit their plan to the Hawai‘i Tourism Authority and publish it on their website.



The proclamation also extends the moratorium on evictions for non-payment of rent until it expires on Dec. 31, 2020. To see the full proclamation, go to <https://governor.hawaii.gov/category/covid-19/covid-19-emergency-proclamations/>.

Hawai‘i welcomes more visitors, announces new policy



A Japanese visitor shows test results to Gov. Ige and Lt. Gov. Green.

The state has announced it is expanding its pre-travel testing agreements to Japan and Canada — Hawai‘i’s top two international markets — to allow visitors from those two countries to take part in the Safe Travels program. Like the one available to domestic travelers from the U.S. mainland, Japanese and Canadian visitors are able to bypass the state’s mandatory 14-day self-quarantine if they provide proof of a negative COVID-19 test from a trusted partner taken 72 hours before departure. The Canadian agreement with Air Canada and WestJet will take effect in mid-December.

“Welcoming our Japanese and Canadian guests back to Hawai‘i is an important step in maintaining the close relationships we’ve developed,” Governor Ige said. “We believe we have created the safest travel testing program in the country and are grateful to be able to make our pre-travel testing program available to their residents.”

In a new policy for domestic transpacific and international flights, travelers must have their COVID-19 test results PRIOR to departure to the islands. The State of Hawai‘i has added more new trusted partners for its domestic transpacific and inter-county pre-travel testing programs. Partners were selected based on their ability to administer the test and expand the testing network, with the goal of making it easier to safely travel to Hawai‘i. For details, go to <https://hawaii-covid19.com/travel-partners/>.

Business Holiday Card: A gift that keeps on giving

More Hawai‘i residents will be enjoying the success of the Hawai‘i Restaurant Card (HRC), including unemployed PUA recipients and workers whose organizations purchased a new “Business Holiday Card” to give to their employees and others. Businesses can order online through Dec. 10 in denominations from \$5 to \$1,000, and the card can be used through March 31, 2021. Eligible PUA recipients — more than 32,000 unemployed part-time workers — received prepaid cards late last month with \$500 to be used at Hawai‘i restaurants, bakeries and food caterers that accept Debit Mastercards through Dec. 15.



State and business leaders with the new holiday card.

“The launch of the HRC was a resounding success, with more than 105,000 eligible individuals activating their cards and spending more than \$26.5 million at eateries across the state over the last few weeks,” said Mike McCartney, director of the Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism. Several local businesses have already committed to ordering the holiday card as a way “to boost our local economy while showing appreciation for their employees and clients this holiday season,” said Rich Wacker, president of American Savings Bank. To order, businesses can visit moneynetwork.com/everwhereaward.

Hawai'i prepares for promise of COVID-19 vaccines

Early reports about a safe and effective COVID-19 vaccine are giving people hope as Hawai'i and other states are ramping up their planning. A plan to implement a voluntary COVID-19 vaccination program is being finalized by the state Department of Health (DOH), in collaboration with more than 150 stakeholders representing more than 90 organizations. "Epidemiologists say at least 60 to 70 percent of the population need to have immunity to a virus to break the chain of transmission," said Governor Ige. "We want Hawai'i to be ready as soon as a viable vaccine that is safe and effective becomes available."



Although a COVID-19 vaccine approved by the Food and Drug Administration isn't expected to be widely available until next year, DOH is preparing now to mobilize what is expected to be a community-wide effort to help protect as many people as possible. "A COVID-19 vaccination has been presented as our ticket to better health and restoration of a sense of normalcy," said **DOH director Dr. Elizabeth Char**. "We have to make sure we get this right, starting with using a safe and effective, FDA-approved vaccine." Since there will initially be limited supplies, the vaccine will be available first to those who fall within certain priority groups. The **first group** includes high-risk healthcare workers and others involved with direct patient care, as well as first responders who may be exposed to COVID-19. Hawai'i residents of all ages who have underlying health conditions, including those 65 and older who live in group settings, also are included in this first category.



DOH branch chief Ron Balajadia and many community stakeholders are ready with COVID-19 vaccination plans.

The **second group** covers K-12 teachers and school staff as well as those in essential industries and people in homeless shelters, prisons and staff who work in similar detention facilities, and adults age 65 and older not included in the first group. The **third group** includes young adults 18 to 22 years and children, newborn to age 17, as well as employees not in previous groups that are considered essential. The **fourth group** includes all Hawai'i residents who didn't fall into any of the other priority groups.

At a House of Representatives briefing last month, **Ronald Balajadia, DOH immunization branch chief**, described the vaccination plan as a "living document" adapted to Hawai'i's needs with public input from multiple stakeholders. He said the planning includes addressing concerns about safety and efficacy, providing mobile teams to reach those in rural or remote areas of the state, and working closely with pharmacies, hospitals, community health centers and other providers. For a copy of the state's draft interim COVID-19 vaccination plan, go to https://hawaiiicovid19.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Hawaii-COVID-19-Vaccination-Plan_Initial-Draft_101620.pdf.



Hearing from the experts

If you're looking for some reassurance about Hawai'i's handling of the pandemic, take a moment to view a **Nov. 12 PBS INSIGHTS forum** with Dr. Libby Char, Lt. Gov. Josh Green, COVID-19 survivor and pediatrician Dr. Leo Pascua and other special guests. They answered questions about current public health concerns and expressed confidence in plans for vaccine distribution. View the forum on <https://www.pbshawaii.org>. Here are some excerpts:

Dr. Char: "We're going to need help from the private sector as well as government and all of our partners, community healthcare centers, physicians, pharmacies. We need to be organized, we need buy-in and we need cooperation and coordination, but we can do this."

Dr. Green: "We'll have to be nimble. We'll obviously focus on those with highest need first, the most susceptible individuals and those (healthcare workers) directly in the line of fire. So next year Christmas will be much better because our kūpuna will have had a vaccination, if they choose, and the same can be said of our first responders and healthcare professionals so they don't have to worry about getting sick and not being able to provide further care. We'll make it work."



Tracking COVID-19 spread

To keep tabs on community spread, the state Department of Health (DOH) is releasing weekly COVID-19 cluster reports to highlight recent examples. One week's report included clusters related to college students attending parties, co-workers who ate lunch together and a cluster at an O'ahu school.

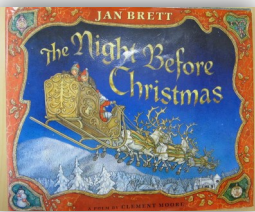
Dr. Emily Roberson, the DOH epidemiologist overseeing investigation and contact tracing, said that most of the new COVID-19 cases stem from residents, not travelers. "People really let their guards down around their friends and family," she said. "The vast majority of transmission we're seeing is within households or when people take breaks at work with their masks off." **She said one thing is clear: masks work.** "They're actually much more effective than we realized," she added. To check updates on COVID-19 clusters, go to <https://health.hawaii.gov/coronavirusdisease2019/what-you-should-know/current-situation-in-hawaii/#cluster>.

BRIGHT SPOTS

Making new traditions for a COVID-safe holiday

If you're looking for some sound advice to celebrate the holidays safely, take a moment to check out First Lady Dawn Amano-Ige's latest [Facebook](#) posts. Her recent "Q&A Hawai'i" guests included **Department of Health interim director Dr. Libby Char** offering her perspective about celebrating safely and **Dr. Bill Sheehan, a psychiatrist at DOH's Honolulu Family Guidance Center**, who shares his hopeful approach to handling the pandemic

"Dr. Char's segment also helps us get to know her," said Mrs. Ige. "Her love and concern for Hawai'i and protecting everyone's health comes through in her advice to us. She's not scolding; she's offering her best health-based recommendations. She's urging us to gather virtually or a little differently this year to keep everyone safe."



'**Olelo, Channel 53, also airs "Conversations with the First Lady"** on Wednesday and Sunday evenings. The December shows will include a reading by Mrs. Ige of the family favorite, "The Night Before Christmas," a glimpse inside Washington Place — the site of past holiday open houses — and a musical appearance by a "special guest" during the program. "Family is still at the core of our community and at the core of who we are," Mrs. Ige said. "That's the beauty of Hawai'i. We just need to hold onto things that are dear to us in these difficult times."



'Q & A Hawai'i' excerpts with Dr. Libby Char

Q. What inspired you to become an emergency physician?

A. In emergency medicine, you see people at their best and at their worst. We're able to help them at that moment in time, even if it's just comforting them or helping to educate. That really appealed to me.

Q. Why did you return home after working on the mainland?

A. I'm a Hawai'i person. I have a whole bunch of brothers scattered across the mainland, but Hawai'i has the things that I love. Also I have my parents here and lots of cousins and aunts and uncles.

Q. It's been a little over two months since you took over as interim director at DOH. What are your current goals and priorities?

A. The overarching priority is the health of the people of Hawai'i. It's been a really huge challenge with the whole COVID pandemic. We're just trying to get the department moving in a good direction, knowing this is going to last for quite some time, and partnering with others in the community, both private and public.

Q. With the state's launch of the pre-travel testing program, do you have any advice for the local community?

A. Actually, yes. I know there are a lot of local people who want to travel (but) honestly, this is not a good time. You have to weigh the pros and cons. We're seeing the COVID numbers spike again all across the United States as well as across Europe. The ICUs are starting to get full on the mainland. Thankfully, we're not in that situation here, but we don't want to be in that position.

Q. Does the pandemic mean we need to skip our traditional family gatherings? What are your safety recommendations?

A. We're such a social culture in Hawai'i. That's one of the beautiful things about us. But this year we need to do it differently — maybe something that's virtual or small gatherings with masks and distancing. And there's light at the end of the tunnel. When we get our population vaccinated, I think we'll see our (case) numbers stabilize and go down.



A DHS lifeline in the pandemic: Raising awareness of SNAP

"SNAP is food. SNAP is love. SNAP is 'ohana." That message is at the heart of a community outreach campaign with the state Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Hawai'i Community Foundation to build awareness of the **Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP)**. Their goal is to reach people who may need support but aren't sure how to apply or are reluctant to seek help through the program.

DHS says there is an unprecedented 50 percent increase in SNAP applications, compared to the same time last year. Nearly 180,000 people in Hawai'i already receive SNAP assistance. To learn more about eligibility, go to www.snapbenefits.hawaii.gov.



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