

**PROTECT  
PUBLIC HEALTH**

**REVIVE  
THE ECONOMY**

**STRENGTHEN  
OUR COMMUNITY**

## **CAPITOL CONNECTION**

**MARCH 2021**

### **Lessons from the pandemic for a Hawai'i 2.0 future**

**C** OVID-19 case counts are down. Vaccinations are up. And every day is moving us closer to a “new normal.” But the new Hawai'i needs to be stronger and better than before, based on the lessons from the pandemic. Do we have what it takes to create a better future while making sure no one gets left behind? Governor Ige and his team, legislators and key community members are seeking answers to this question, and they're looking for help from all of us to create a Hawai'i 2.0.

**Q. What do you want people to know about our current vaccination plans?**

**A.** So far, the vaccine rollout has been going smoothly, but the biggest challenge for Hawai'i and all the states is we need more doses. We have 100 vaccination sites statewide that could scale up quickly. We could administer double the number of doses we're currently receiving from the federal government. The faster we can receive more supply, the faster we can vaccinate people in the next priority groups.

**Q. What is the state doing to guard against the COVID variants?**

**A.** We're one of the few states that have the total capability to identify these variants quickly to curb any spread. The good news is the same precautions that we've taken since the start of the pandemic still work for the variants. They include wearing masks, washing hands, staying home when you're sick, watching your distance and avoiding large groups.

**Q. Is the state budget forecast looking better? What additional help is available for families and the unemployed?**

**A.** We're cautiously optimistic about the state's economic recovery, but we still have a significant budget shortfall. The federal government did pass a funding package in December with aid to schools, vaccination support, rent relief, help for businesses and broadband expansion. We're hoping for more aid in the months ahead. We're doing the best we can to update unemployment benefits in our antiquated system, and I've extended the eviction moratorium for another 60 days. The most recent Council on Revenues forecast was better. However, our general fund revenues are still down 9.4 percent over last year, and we still have loans to repay to cover unemployment insurance and state payroll. Our best hope is additional federal aid to the states to cover shortfalls and maintain critical public services.

**Q. Why is this a historic moment to drive change in the state?**

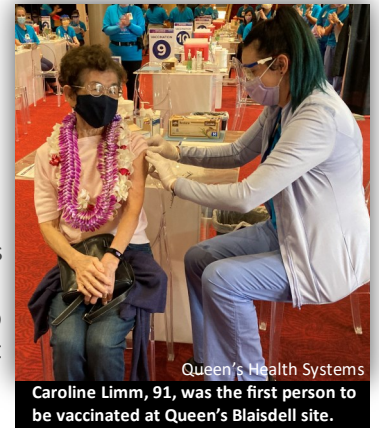
**A.** The **Hawai'i 2.0 initiative** I described in my State of the State speech is asking different community sectors, “What did we learn in the past year and does it change the state's priorities?” We don't want to reinvent the wheel. We're looking to develop a program of action and apply a COVID lens to what has been an enormous transformation of the world as we knew it. One example is the need for broadband since virtually everyone had to go online during the pandemic. We found, without connectivity, many people were at a huge disadvantage. The good news is we are already looking at ways to fix this, including the work of the Broadband Hui and pilot projects such as the one in the state Department of Transportation to extend the reach to more people on all islands (see stories inside).



**SCENES FROM THE PANDEMIC:** People are connecting virtually, and seniors like Walter at The Plaza Moanalua are being vaccinated.

# Taking our best shot to fight COVID-19

**C**COVID-19 variants or not, lucky you live Hawai'i. That seems to be the consensus among state health officials keeping tabs on vaccine distribution, virus case counts and public attitudes toward getting immunized. "We're doing well, and that's a tribute to the entire community and the efforts of everyone wearing their masks and avoiding large gatherings," said state Department of Health (DOH) director Dr. Libby Char in a Honolulu Star-Advertiser interview. So far, **vaccine distribution at more than 100 sites statewide is under way**, with systems ready to ramp up as the supply from the federal government increases. "Instead of having three or four mega-centers where you have to queue up in long lines, DOH has worked hard to certify more locations, including neighborhood pharmacies and community health centers that can surge as needed when more doses arrive," said Governor Ige. **DOH has said the system could administer 80,000 vaccinations a week — double the doses currently being received.**



**Also working in Hawai'i's favor is a positive shift toward getting vaccinated** as people across the state line up for their shots. A recent DOH poll showed that 91% of respondents plan to get vaccinated — 55% as soon as their turn comes up and 36% at a later time. Previous surveys in December showed that only about 50% of residents said they would accept the COVID-19 vaccine. "This is a positive change in a relatively short time," said Dr. Char. "(People) are much more comfortable as they see family, friends, co-workers and others safely receiving their first and second doses." This community willingness to be vaccinated, as well as following safety precautions, will become especially important as more transmissible strains of the virus begin to circulate. Acting state epidemiologist Sarah Kemble has said it might take 80% to 90% of the population to be vaccinated to achieve "herd immunity." For updates, go to <https://hawaiiocovid19.com/>.

## Help is on the way for unemployment, rent relief



Working with an antiquated mainframe system, the DLIR has had to reprogram the old system for every new federal unemployment program. However, **DLIR officials recently announced they've signed a contract with Idaho-based Solid State Operations to modernize the technology.** Hawai'i's project follows Solid State's successful renovation of Alabama's UI system, which launched in January 2020. In September of last year, Alabama ranked #1 in the nation in benefits payment timeliness. The DLIR says the enhanced platform will be easier to use, offers more automation than its predecessor, and will save money on IT costs, prevent UI-related fraud, waste, and abuse, and provide timely, uninterrupted benefits and modern services to employers.



**The COVID-19 relief package passed by Congress in December** includes aid to public schools, rent and mortgage relief, support to the state Department of Health for vaccination roll-out and National Guard involvement, and additional funds for unemployment benefits, small business help, and broadband access. "For rent relief, the federal government has broadened support to include utility costs and made the process more flexible," said Governor Ige. "We'll be able to help more people because we can provide payments directly to tenants if the landlord doesn't accept payment. Each county will have its own system, but we're taking the lessons learned from the state's previous program." Anyone who has a household income at or below 80 percent of the area median income, is unemployed due to COVID-19, or is at risk of becoming homeless could be eligible. More details will be provided through each county's housing office in the next few weeks.

## Be a hero. Wear a mask.



**Masks are cool, America.** Just ask the **Warner Bros. superheroes** featured in the [latest public service announcement](#) on TV and social media. From Wonder Woman to Aquaman (thank you, Jason Momoa), the message from the Centers for Disease Control, the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA), and the Ad Council is to "Mask Up, America so we can get back to doing our favorite things." "The simple act of wearing a mask in public is one of the most effective measures to curb the spread of disease," said IDSA President Dr. Thomas File, Jr. "It's a public health action that can save lives and help the country get back to business."

# Setting the future in motion with Hawai'i 2.0

**H**ow do you get buy-in from the entire state to make change happen? Part of the answer, Governor Ige said in his State of the State address, is to enlist the help of virtually every sector of the community to identify opportunities created by the pandemic. “We want to take the priorities we’ve already established and add the COVID lens,” he explained. “We want people to ask, ‘Have the past 13 months changed our priorities? What have we learned that could shape our future while preserving our island values?’”



**Key legislative, business, labor and community leaders** are being contacted to lead the effort that will result in recommendations for specific actions and legislation for the 2022 session. The point is to seize the moment when people are receptive to change, and resources, such as federal funding, are available to support that change, said Mike McCartney, director of the state Department of Business, Economic Development and Tourism. “This is a once-in-a-lifetime moment when we can have a broad community conversation about the kind of future we want,” he said. “The pandemic has accelerated change and forced us to look at life in new ways. **Hawai'i 2.0 is about balancing local and global economic change without losing our values. This is our chance take action.**”

## The Broadband Hui: Bridging the digital divide



The Kuauli team prepares computers for Hilo distribution.

**I**t would be an understatement to say COVID-19 has changed everything — from work to school to travel to family bubbles. Who knew we would be online nearly 24/7, navigating websites, and Zooming while trying to stay safe and survive? The pandemic has shown us gaps and community needs we didn’t know were there. But it also has spurred people, such as those in the **Broadband Hui — a cross-section of some 250 public and private stakeholders** — to realize that the state’s digital future depends on action now. “The Broadband Hui has helped galvanize the community voice,” said state broadband strategy officer Burt Lum. “What the pandemic helped everyone realize is that we’ve got to have the internet connection, the hardware, the digital literacy and the know-how to be full participants. If you don’t have ‘digital equity,’ you’re still not there.” **This equity extends communitywide** — whether you’re a student learning online, a person applying for unemployment or a new job, or someone talking to a doctor.

**Because this digital connection became crucial in the pandemic**, the federal government has provided for expansion of infrastructure devoted to delivering better internet services. However, Lum says other funds are needed to train and equip people to take advantage of these connections. “Because of the pandemic, we’ve had a multitude of groups who recognize our ‘digital divide’ and are providing ‘last-mile solutions.’” Lum named several community groups who responded to the call to help, such as the **Kuauli Digital Opportunities Initiative**, which got computer equipment into the hands of needy families or **WiFi on Wheels**, which distributed mobile WiFi buses to rural areas. **HOPE Services Telehealth Program** used CARES Act funds to purchase iPads and wireless connections so field workers could check on homeless communities on Hawai'i island. Other projects in the works will provide a community network for **Pu'uhonua o Wai'anae**, and another \$30 million from the Consolidated Appropriations Act 2021 is earmarked for the Department of Hawaiian Homelands.

## Connecting more people to the digital highway

**I**f we've learned anything in the pandemic, it's that access to broadband — that digital superhighway — affects everyone. So how do we help people work or learn from home? One answer already in the works is a pilot project from the Hawai'i Department of Transportation (HDOT) to help more people connect to the internet, even if they don't have their own service provider. HDOT Deputy Director for Highways Ed Sniffen is preparing a state-managed WiFi system especially to help rural communities. **The project will focus on eight areas: Kalihi, Kapa'a, Wai'anae, Nanakuli, Waimānalo, Kau, Puna and Hana.** “We’re using the backbone of our state highways and county roadways to extend wireless into underserved neighborhoods,” explained Sniffen. “From my perspective, WiFi is like electricity now. You can’t live without it; you have to have it.”



Katie Young Yamanaka

HDOT wants to provide more wireless access to rural areas.

**The pilot project, to get under way this spring**, will provide WiFi access to two people per household, devices if needed, and a staffed help desk. Improved wireless mesh connectivity will also be used to increase the efficiency and safety of the state’s highway system and lay the foundation for Hawai'i to become a test site for connected autonomous vehicles. “The pandemic, when so many people had to operate virtually, made this a huge priority for the state and the federal side as well,” said Sniffen. “Everybody’s aligned to make sure broadband is front and center. **We want to make sure we make the most of this opportunity because it’s the key to our next industry for the future.**” Federal transportation and broadband funding will be leveraged to pay for the construction and operation of the pilot system.

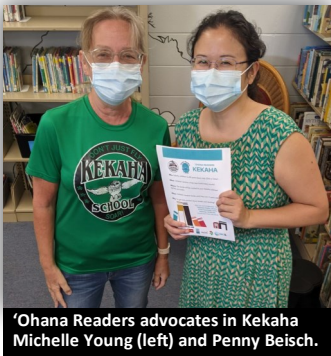
# Connecting to the White House and Kekaha, Kaua'i

**D**own-to-earth . . . a good listener . . . inspiring. Those are some of the impressions Hawai'i's First Lady, Dawn Amano-Ige, has of **Dr. Jill Biden**, wife of U.S. President Joe Biden. Following a request from the White House, Mrs. Ige facilitated a virtual get-acquainted session with the First Spouses from the 50 states last month, where they talked about some of their initiatives and the challenges of their position. Mrs. Ige is serving as chair of the Spouses' Leadership Committee for the National Governors Association.



"What was impressive to me is that she took the time to meet with our group so soon after the inauguration," Mrs. Ige said. "She's very committed to her work as First Lady. For Hawai'i, I talked about the **DOE's Grab and Go school meals and 'Ohana Readers.**"

Mrs. Ige continued, "As First Spouses, we're not in the middle of politics so we can focus on bipartisan issues such as food insecurity, education and other family issues. We bring in experts to learn how we can move initiatives forward in our states."



'Ohana Readers advocates in Kekaha Michelle Young (left) and Penny Beisch.

**In February, Mrs. Ige's 'Ohana Readers project took another step forward on Kaua'i** to help keiki develop a love of reading. Thanks to a \$2,000 grant from the KIUC Charitable Foundation, children 4 ½ years and younger living in Kekaha with a 96752 zip code can receive a free, age appropriate book each month in the mail through the Dolly Parton Imagination Library. Families can contact the Waimea Public Library at (808) 338-6848 for more details. The project's local partners include the Hawai'i Library System, the Friends of the Library and Learning to Grow. Today over 1.5 million children across the world have registered to participate. 'Ohana Readers also has launched projects on Moloka'i and Lāna'i.

**Kekaha Elementary School principal Marilyn Asahi** said programs like 'Ohana Readers are vital to laying the foundation for success in school and in life because of the skills they build. "Our community is still struggling after the closing of the sugar mill and sometimes can feel forgotten," she explained. "We want to perpetuate a love of reading and to have the students be proud of who they are. Having a project with the First Lady makes the students feel proud." As an educator herself, Mrs. Ige has focused on programs that develop students' self-esteem and values such as kindness and empathy. "I like the idea of self-empowerment, especially since students have had to adjust to life during the pandemic. That includes their socio-emotional growth as well as academic achievement," she added.

## DOH launches AlohaSafe to slow COVID-19 spread

**H**awai'i residents are being urged to download a free notification app to their smartphones to help control the spread of COVID-19. The app is intended to support the state Department of Health's contact tracing efforts by using Bluetooth technology to record interactions between other users of AlohaSafe. It can notify users if they have been exposed to a COVID-19 infected individual who is also an app user. The app will not identify the infected user or provide any other personal identification.

**AlohaSafe was first piloted in Maui County** and credited with helping to control a surge in COVID cases on Lāna'i. "The app was critical in helping us control the spread," said Mayor Mike Victorino. "We strongly believe these types of technological advances can help us get the upper hand in the fight against COVID-19." It was developed in partnership with aio Digital and the Hawai'i Executive Collaborative, and is the state's official COVID-19 exposure notification app. "AlohaSafe Alert is another important tool in the fight against COVID-19," said Dr. Libby Char, state health director. "This innovative app was developed for the community, by the community and has the potential to greatly increase the speed of the exposure notification process. It allows anyone who receives an alert to quickly self-quarantine and get tested if needed."

### Some key features of AlohaSafe Alert include:

- Participants may opt in/out at any time.
- Only DOH officials will have access to data, and all data will be kept anonymous.
- The app allows smartphones to interact but does not keep track of any GPS data.
- Should you test positive for COVID-19, your identity is kept private.

To download the free app, go to the Google Play or Apple App Store on your phone. For details, visit <https://www.alohasafealert.org/>.



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