

Correcting the Visions of Paradise

By Stephen P. Jiang, ACSW

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Hawai'i. The word alone conjures thoughts of beautiful beaches, aqua blue waters, and warm sunny days. The nation's only island state, 2500 miles southwest of California, is the most remote land mass in the world. Typically, visitors vacationing in Hawai'i take home memories of resort locales such as Waikiki, Lahaina, or Kona. Visions of Hawai'i created by media images and television shows such as Baywatch Hawai'i perpetuate these stereotypes.

What most visitors do not realize is that Hawai'i is a rural state. Nearly 90 percent of the state's land mass with 20 percent of the state's population is federally designated as rural. The remaining 80 percent of the state's population reside on the island of O'ahu, where Honolulu, the state's only urban center, is located.

All seven of Hawai'i's other islands are rural. These communities face many problems common to all rural areas, with the additional challenges of allocating resources to distinct island populations.

Misconceptions about Hawai'i tend to blind policymakers to the state's health issues, especially challenges faced by Hawai'i's rural residents. "We have to get policymakers to realize that they cannot think of Hawai'i based on their last vacation. The state's rural health issues are real and unique," said Kirk Lange, health planner in the Hawai'i State Office of Rural Health (SORH).

Health care resource allocation represents one such problem. While a significant number of residents live in rural Hawai'i, the state's health care resources are concentrated primarily in Honolulu. As a result of the imbalance of resource allocation, six of the of the state's eight primary care health professions shortage areas (HPSA), all seven of its dental HPSAs, and all of its four mental health HPSAs are on neighbor islands.

Access to adequate care is made more difficult on the neighbor islands because the only means of transportation between islands is by plane. "Neighbor island residents traveling to Honolulu



Ethnic Makeup in Hawai'i		
Total population of Hawai'i was 1,248,807 in 1998.		
Hawai'i's Department of Health break down its population in 1998 is:		
Ethnicity	Number of People	Percent
Unmixed (except Hawaiian)	688,747	60%
Caucasian	252,320	22%
Black	17,433	1.5%
Japanese	208,653	18%
Chinese	41,843	4.0%
Filipino	146,380	12.7%
Korean	13,728	1.2%
Samoa/Tongan	8,390	>1.0%
Mixed (except Hawaiian)	223,595	18%
Hawaiian/Part Hawaiian	236,465	19%

in search of care typically spend \$100 for round trip airfare, ground transportation and maybe lodging," according to Valerie Yin, director of the SORH. Furthermore, there are no reliable means of public transportation on neighbor islands, so even access to local care is difficult.

Transportation issues and isolation also make it hard to attract and retain health professionals in rural Hawai'i. As in other rural states, most health professionals choose to live and practice in urban areas rather than in rural communities.

While Hawai'i has long enjoyed a reputation as a state with many positive health status indicators, the state still faces a number of health issues. The rates of suicide, hepatitis A and C, measles, mumps, rubella, chronic and binge drinking, cancer, diabetes, and obesity are examples of key health status indicators that are worse in Hawai'i than the U.S. average. In most cases, Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders have the worst health indicators in the state. Of special concern, Hawai'i has the worst tuberculosis indicators in the nation.

Hawai'i's poor economic health has exacerbated its health needs. While the economy has been surging in the continental U.S., Hawai'i is still struggling. During the 1990s, agriculture, tourism, and military support, the three

pillars of Hawai'i's economy, were all negatively impacted by downturns in the American and Asian economies. Hawai'i's rural hospitals have been hurt financially by the state's economic downturn, as well as by cuts in federal reimbursements mandated by the Balanced Budget Act of 1997. Heightened unemployment and underemployment have reduced coverage by Hawai'i's much touted employer mandate for health insurance coverage.

SORH is meeting these unique rural island needs through a number of efforts. SORH is implementing the Critical Access Hospital program to help maintain access to hospital care in rural areas. To build community-based economic development capacity, SORH is undertaking efforts to replicate the federal Office of Rural Health Policy/ USDA Operation Rural Health Works project. All of these efforts are being directed by a state-wide comprehensive rural health plan, currently being developed in partnership with the state's dynamic rural health association.

SORH is also working with the Hawai'i State Primary Care Association, the State Primary Care Office, and Hawai'i's Area Health Education Centers to remedy health professional shortage problems through various recruitment and retention efforts. Key programs include the Native

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Hawaiian Health Scholarship Program (NHHSP), the J-1 visa waiver program, and the National Health Service Corps. The NHHSP is designed to recruit Native Hawaiian students who are required to serve in predominantly Native Hawaiian communities.

Yin concludes that raising education and awareness about rural health issues is also a critical part of her office's plans. "People whose perception of Hawai'i is based on media mistakenly assume all is well in Hawai'i. A great deal of education has to be conducted to eliminate the stereotypes that divert attention from the health care needs in Hawai'i in general, and rural Hawai'i in particular," she said.

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