

Three Principles Guide Community First
By Karen Maedo

Community First was launched in 2014 by Barry Taniguchi in response to the growing health care cost crisis facing not only our community, but the country. Its mission is to create a sustainable medical and social service system which provides quality care for all the people of Hawai'i Island.

Barry saw the cost crisis as more of a business issue than a medical one because of flawed payment models, fragmentation of information, and broken workflows. It was a problem which could not be solved by the medical system alone but requires the entire community to collaborate.

In the end, he felt we needed to care for health not just treat disease, and not only take personal responsibility for our own health but help each other care for our mutual well-being. Barry shared three principles to meet this formidable challenge: (1) Only together. (2) Make the invisible visible. (3) Try, and don't expect to get it right the first time.

It's been a year since Barry's death, and Community First, led by president and chairperson Toby Taniguchi, continues the work of being the forum that brings business leaders, medical and social service providers, health plans and community members together.

Community First called a meeting for a Regional Health Partnership in October. I attended as a community member, and as a retired teacher felt out of my element, but I feel moved to continue Barry's legacy so I am contributing by making the invisible visible, sharing our discussions and informing the public of the progress being made.

The meeting was led by Community First's Executive Director Mike Sayama. At this gathering, community leaders focused on the continued challenges brought about by COVID-19. Lisa Rantz, executive director of Hilo Medical Center Foundation, worked with state partners to successfully recruit new doctors. Dan Brinkman, CEO of Hilo Medical Center shared updates on COVID-19 responses at HMC and Yukio Okutsu Veterans State Home. Representatives from HMSA, AlohaCare and Dr. Hannah Preston-Pita, CEO of BISAC, have partnered with agencies and legislators to address COVID-19 from a community perspective and increase folks' access to care and information.

Christina Higa, PhD from the Pacific Basin Telehealth Resource Center, talked about the substantial increase in telehealth use to maximize access and safety. In addition to maximizing the use of telehealth, the Regional Health Partnership discussed effective care for high-need, high-cost patients, determining on/off island services, and developing a community quality improvement process.

Hawaii Tribune Herald

Ending uninformed and unnecessarily painful death is the work of both the Community First Advance Health Care Directive committee, and Brenda Ho, CEO of Hawaii Care Choices. The AHCD committee holds monthly virtual sessions to help folks complete a directive that documents one's end-of-life wishes. It is led by Charlene Iboshi, Amy Hamane and a group of dedicated volunteers.

Now in its sixth year, the organization's Blood Pressure Educator Project has UH-Hilo School of Nursing seniors teach sixth-graders how to take blood pressure readings of adult family members and friends. Children teach adults much about good health. With COVID-19 at the forefront, the Our Kuleana campaign and its eye-catching ads was developed by Randy Kurohara to inspire our community to come together to end COVID-19 spread on Hawaii Island.

We are trying mightily, and small steps have been taken. We have learned that achievements come from making mistakes along the way. These are just a few examples of ways our community is coming together to care for our health. As Barry's first principle says, "Only together" can we succeed.

Karen Maedo is a community advocate.

Community First is a nonprofit founded by Barry Taniguchi in 2014. Today it is led by Toby Taniguchi and a volunteer board of community leaders. It serves as a neutral forum for the community to come together and as a catalyst for solutions to improve health and lower medical costs on Hawaii Island based on the community good.