

HMC Is Up To The Challenge

By Elena Cabatu, Director of Public Affairs at Hilo Medical Center

Throughout the pandemic, our hospital's guiding belief has been that vaccinations are a key component in the battle against COVID-19. It's sound public health that will help us return our children to school, get our economy back on solid footing, and resume a normal way of life that we all have dearly missed. On December 23, 2021, Hilo Medical Center launched our vaccination strategy, starting with our staff, 76% of whom are vaccinated. Once completed, we moved on to vaccinating community healthcare professionals, and then kupuna 75 years and older.

An integral part in vaccinating our kupuna also included working with Longs/CVS to vaccinate our staff and residents in our Extended Care Facility, Hale Ho`ola Hamakua, and, especially, the Yukio Okutsu State Veterans Home. KTA's pharmacy also pitched in to target care homes, senior housing complexes and other special category kūpuna groups.

We have been working with the Department of Health, Hawai'i County, Kona Community Hospital, North Hawai'i Community Hospital and KTA Pharmacy to set up the island's first vaccination Points of Dispensing or PODs. In the last few weeks, we welcomed additional PODs at Hamakua-Kohala Health Center, Bay Clinic, Longs/CVS, Kaiser, Veterans Affairs Clinic, and Big Island Docs/East Hawaii IPA.

This month, our hospital stepped up to the challenge of planning and executing an efficient mass vaccination clinic. On Saturday, February 20, we administered 2,000 doses to educators, and other frontline workers from airlines, retail, and supermarkets. We met this challenge with the help of our volunteers from our hospital, UH Hilo and Hawaii Community College, the Kiwanis Club and Hui Mālama Ola Nā 'Ōiwi.

On the same day as our mass vaccination clinic, Bay Clinic, Ka'u Rural Health Association, Ka'u Rural Health Clinic and Hui Mālamā Ola Nā 'Ōiwi held their own POD in Na`alehu, reaching over 100 kūpuna 75 years and older.

Initially, we were concerned about vaccine hesitancy, but demand from our frontline workers and kūpuna have dispelled many of those concerns. Kūpuna, especially, are eager and have been overwhelmingly positive in their demand for the vaccine. For the past 6 weeks, our hospital has vaccinated kūpuna 75 years and older at the rate of over 200 per day or 1,000 per week, in addition to the other PODs on the island. Our best estimate is that we are about 4-5 weeks away from completing vaccinations for our kūpuna who are 75 years and older.

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For community members awaiting their turns to receive the vaccine – we hear you and are working diligently to open appointments as soon as possible. As we continue to vaccinate by age groups, we pledge to do our very best to care for you, and help you feel safe and supported. I have heard from so many who are ready to be vaccinated: I am a 40-year-old with stage-four cancer; I am 65 years old and have COPD; I am a caregiver to my sick, elderly parents; I am a mechanic and have never stopped working through the pandemic.

Earlier this week, we hit a big milestone of administering our 10,000th dose of the Pfizer vaccine. Plans are underway to ramp up and do more mass vaccination clinics as we are hopeful that the supply will greatly increase in the coming months.

We stand by our commitment to vaccinate our community – our family, friends and neighbors. We know it will take some time, but we are up to the challenge to reach you.

Community First 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 Hawai'i Island.