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HAWAII NEWS

Hawaii's latest COVID-19 surge is touching off labor shortages

By [Allison Schaefer](#) • Dec. 29, 2021

Amid surging infection counts as the COVID-19 threat is poised to enter its third year, pandemic fatigue is mounting for Hawaii's workers and businesses.

Here and elsewhere, the rapidly rising tally of new coronavirus cases, driven in large part by the highly contagious omicron variant, is delivering the latest blow to hospitals, police departments, supermarkets and other critical operations struggling to maintain a full contingent of front-line workers.

Governments have taken steps to stem the bleeding across a range of jobs considered essential for society. Honolulu Hale reported Tuesday that there were 29 active COVID cases among the city's firefighting personnel, with an additional 27 in quarantine.

Tim Sakahara, spokesman for Mayor Rick Blangiardi, said Honolulu Fire Department staffing and operations have not been affected. "The city continues to coordinate with the Department of Human Resources and all city departments to mitigate any COVID-19 impact to operations," Sakahara said.

Honolulu Police Department spokesman Sara Yoro said there are no HPD shortages at this time.

But nurses and other essential workers worry that current staffing woes and ongoing public health risks could spur increased burnout among their ranks. Nonessential workers are tiring, too.

Hilton Raethel, Healthcare Association of Hawaii president and CEO, told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser on Monday that at least 700 more health care workers are needed in the islands to manage the additional strain touched off by the omicron variant as the health care resources across the state are approaching capacity levels.

Rachel Reeves, a spokesperson for the American Health Care Association and the National Center for Assisted Living, an industry trade group, said many caregivers are burned out.

"Not only have many experienced tremendous loss, it has been exhausting — physically and emotionally — battling this virus day in and day out," Reeves said. Additionally, more workers are testing positive for infection.

Bryant de Venecia, a spokesman for Unite Here Local 5, which represents 1,910 union members who work at Kaiser health care facilities in Hawaii, said, "We've seen an increase in Kaiser workers testing positive for COVID-19 over the last two weeks as the COVID surge has been happening." He added, "It's a given that other workers are having to work harder."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Monday cut in half the recommended time an infected person should isolate, to five days. But it's still unclear if the CDC's guidance will help Hawaii businesses better navigate the surge's impact on staffing levels.



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On Tuesday, de Venecia said, Kaiser officials were still directing COVID-positive union members to stay home 10 days.

Sherry Menor-McNamara, president and CEO of the Chamber of Commerce Hawaii, said businesses must prioritize the health and safety of employees while weighing the latest CDC guidance. "It's just so contagious right now," Menor-McNamara said.

The spread has some Hawaii businesses reducing hours, or briefly shutting down in response to worker shortages and the desire to prioritize safety, she said.

Tanioka's Seafoods & Catering in Waipahu closed Monday and doesn't plan to reopen until Jan. 19. The company said on social media that the decision was "due to the recent statewide surge of COVID-19 cases, and for the safety of our staff and customers."

Tanioka's said it would fill pre-existing orders for curbside pickup, but is not taking new phone orders or allowing walk-ins.

KTA Superstores closed the KTA Puainako location in Hilo on Monday after three store associates tested positive for COVID-19. The associates, who had last worked between Saturday and Monday, are isolating, according to a store notice. The store reopened early Tuesday after a thorough cleaning. In an abundance of caution, KTA said it "tested all associates, even if they did not have close contact with someone who tested positive."

In Honolulu's downtown area, Menor-McNamara said, the Pacific Club revised its service and cut menu items after chefs were sidelined.

Menor-McNamara said the pandemic has exacerbated Hawaii's pre-pandemic workforce shortages. Among small-scale businesses, when even one worker tests positive or is exposed to someone with an infection, a workplace can be stretched thin. Further, Menor-McNamara said she's also hearing from businesses that more workers are taking sick days to care for children who have contracted COVID-19 or have been exposed to the virus.

Some Hawaii businesses that had planned to return to in-person work models by the start of 2022 are rethinking plans and extending remote options. Menor-McNamara noted that another challenge is tied to supply-chain snags.

Overall, she said, Hawaii businesses are bringing in less holiday revenue than expected due to operational changes and customer declines. Due to omicron-related concerns, they're also bracing for the possibility of stepped-up government-imposed COVID-19 restrictions.

Hawaii County on Monday reduced its indoor gathering limit to 10 people — down from 25 — as cases continue to surge statewide.

Hawaii County Mayor Mitch Roth, who recently tested positive for COVID-19 — despite being fully vaccinated and having received a booster shot — said in a statement, "We know people are going to gather to celebrate the New Year, and we want to ensure that if they do, that they do so outdoors, where it's safe."

He continued, "We don't want to roll back any other restrictions, and the only way for us to ensure that we don't have to is by doing what's in the best interest of everyone in our community — mask up, distance when possible, and stay home if you feel sick."

While current challenges are especially great for small businesses — some 99% of Hawaii's businesses are small businesses — some large employers such as Hawaii's hospitality companies and airlines are feeling pinched, too.

Jerry Gibson, president of the Hawaii Hotel Alliance, said staffing is still about 15% below where hoteliers would like it to be. "We had a lot of people in our industry right when COVID started and through COVID that were eligible to retire and took it," Gibson said. "A lot of people simply left the islands."

The omicron-fueled surge has compounded the labor situation by “adding to the call-outs,” he said. “We’ve had a smattering over the last two to three weeks.”

Gibson said the number of COVID-related call-outs has been manageable, but hotels are encouraging workers to get fully vaccinated and to get a booster shot.

Hawaiian Airlines spokeswoman Marissa Villegas said the carrier has seen a slight impact on operations.

“Our employees live in our communities. And as case counts rise in Hawaii, we’ve unfortunately experienced a corresponding increase in work colleagues contracting the virus,” Villegas said. “We are closely monitoring our operations and are adjusting to circumstances as needed.”

Villegas said Hawaiian had a relatively small number of cancellations over the Christmas weekend.

“We cancelled five neighbor island flights and one trans-Pacific flight on Friday due to staffing shortages,” she said. “We also cancelled two neighbor island and three trans-Pacific flights on Saturday, and one neighbor island flight on Sunday.”

Villegas added, “Those who were impacted were successfully re-accommodated on other flights, and we continue to thank our guests for their patience and understanding.” She said other areas of Hawaiian Airlines’ business have not been affected by the increase in Hawaii’s COVID cases.

“Our offices remain open and we continue to service our guests and maintain regular operations,” she said. “We have asked employees who are able to work from home to do so for the next two weeks while we monitor COVID infection rates in our communities.”

Villegas said Hawaiian Airlines has seen a slight decrease in travel demand as omicron-related cases increase across the nation. However, she said, bookings continue to reflect overall strong demand for Hawaii-related travel.

“We are confident that as more travelers elect to receive their vaccines and/or booster, consumer confidence in trans-Pacific travel will return to — if not exceed — pre-pandemic levels,” she said.

The Associated Press contributed to this story.



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