

## Introduction

Homeless response systems across the country have worked tirelessly to vaccinate people experiencing homelessness against COVID-19. This has involved coordinating with local public health and other health care partners, educating staff and clients about the vaccines, answering questions and concerns about the vaccines to build vaccine confidence, and creating easy and barrier-free opportunities for individuals to get vaccinated. This brief outlines one community's testing and vaccination campaigns and the efforts they made to create successful outcomes.

## O'ahu at a Glance

O'ahu is Hawai'i's most populous island, which is home to nearly one million residents and the state capital, Honolulu. According to the 2020 Point in Time count, O'ahu also has Hawai'i's largest count of people experiencing homelessness (4,448 individuals), with a majority (53 percent) of individuals living unsheltered on beaches, in encampments, and in the woods. Partners in Care (PIC), the Continuum of Care (CoC) lead agency, is the planning and coordinating body for homeless services on the island which partners with many different cross-system entities to prevent and end homelessness for Hawai'i's most vulnerable citizens.

## Rapid Outbreak Response

As part of their work coordinating housing and services for people experiencing homelessness, PIC had existing relationships with Project Vision, a community-based health provider that works to improve access to healthcare for all Hawaiians, and the Hawai'i Department of Health's (DOH's) Behavioral Health Services Administration (BHA), which oversees the alcohol and drug abuse, mental health, and developmental disabilities divisions. Project Vision was a known entity among people experiencing homelessness, as they offer vision and health screenings along with mobile shower units at set locations across the island. BHA has relationships with the CoC and its member agencies.

When the pandemic hit, these partners came together to reduce COVID-19 infections among people experiencing homelessness by initiating regular testing, quarantine and isolation for COVID-19 positive cases, contact tracing, and improved access to hygiene and sanitation supplies to address the closure of public facilities. Recognizing the need for daily updates on COVID-19, PIC began daily communication with its member agencies and BHA expanded the scope of the state's crisis hotline to include COVID-19 information and testing site locations. Project Vision was asked to offer testing alongside the National Guard and local providers, and testing consent forms included authorization to share results with PIC and allow them to be recorded in the Homeless Management Information System (HMIS). When positive cases were identified, individuals were offered isolation options, including [Temporary Quarantine and Isolation Centers](#) and DOH-funded hotels. Individuals in these locations were given medical treatment and case management services to connect them with other necessary supports, including rapid rehousing.

Once the vaccine became available, the focus shifted to developing a comprehensive vaccination plan grounded in equity and consumer choice.

## A Coordinated and Comprehensive Approach to Vaccinations

The three primary partners—PIC, Project Vision, and BHA—put forth a recommendation that all people experiencing homelessness should be prioritized in Tier 1C for vaccinations. State leadership agreed and paved the way for a comprehensive vaccination plan that covered the whole island, was flexible and trauma-informed, and emphasized client choice of vaccine type. To provide equitable access to all people experiencing homelessness, regardless of location, the partners created smaller vaccination hubs that could offer onsite vaccinations and would allow for vaccines to be taken offsite to meet people where they were (e.g., harbors, beaches, and shelters). Vaccinations were offered both day and night, with vaccinators working irregular and long hours. Project Vision, as the vaccination lead, outfitted backpacks for vaccinators that went to unsheltered locations, and outfitted cars with portable refrigerators to take the vaccine to the more remote parts of the island.

Many staff, agencies, and volunteers came together to make this vaccination campaign successful. One way the partners prepared for the campaign was to offer training on trauma-informed care, de-escalation, and “Homelessness 101.” This included leveraging partner organization expertise like the [Hawai‘i Health & Harm Reduction Center](#), [Institute for Human Services](#), and Kamehameha Schools. They also prioritized homeless service staff for vaccinations and offered vaccinations for volunteers who supported the vaccination clinics but were not in a prioritized group.

## Power of Relationships

A significant part of O‘ahu’s success is the importance placed on relationships—not only among providers but between providers and the people they serve. PIC, Project Vision, and BHA had established relationships in the community before the pandemic. The CoC’s outreach teams were established and known among those living unsheltered. When COVID-19 struck, the partners came together with a singular purpose, delegated roles based on expertise, and aligned agency leadership. There were many times the partners had to rely on one another and trust that promises made would be kept (such as outlaying significant funding for testing and vaccination supplies with a promise of reimbursement). As a result, PIC, Project Vision, and BHA have strengthened their partnership.

The three partners also leveraged their organizational relationships. BHA used its authority to help stand up vaccination clinics rapidly. A Project Vision funder connected them with a vendor that supplied syringes when the island experienced a syringe shortage. They also had the foresight and connections to order portable refrigerators and other supplies needed to outfit cars for mobile vaccinations. Lastly, the partners had medical professionals across the island volunteer their time for vaccination clinics.

## Cutting Red Tape and Creating a Culture of Yes

The Department of Health’s support was critical to O‘ahu’s testing and vaccine campaigns. The BHA team focused on eliminating barriers to testing and vaccinations and maintained flexibility to adapt to new circumstances that arose. There was no shortage of challenges, but the team approached every situation with the belief that there was a solution, which created a collective problem-solving expectation and response.

## Applying Lessons Learned

The partners view their experiences over the past year and a half as an opportunity to learn, grow, and plan for the future. The partners learned they were able to streamline processes and make quick decisions due to the ongoing urgency throughout the pandemic and are evaluating how they can keep the sense of urgency but transition from crisis mode to a more strategic and effective sustainable rhythm. They are also focused on eliminating red tape whenever possible. Additionally, the partners recognized that some of their established systems were reactive, not proactive. The crisis of homelessness existed pre-pandemic and will continue unless all partners focus on addressing the root causes of homelessness and ensuring rapid transition to permanent housing when episodes of homelessness occur.

During the height of the pandemic, team members worked 12-hour days with no rest in between; doing this for months on end has taken a toll. Agency leadership worked to counter stress and burnout with hazard pay and bonuses for each new testing and vaccination milestone. Now, Project Vision’s CEO is having one-on-one conversations with each team member to check in and evaluate what they need. Other agencies are doing the same to ensure that providers are themselves healthy and feel supported so they may continue to serve their most vulnerable clients with compassion and care.

PIC, Project Vision, and the BHA wish to thank all of the staff, volunteers, and leaders who worked together to care for Hawai‘i’s most vulnerable citizens. They could not have done this alone.

To learn more about O‘ahu’s testing and vaccination campaigns, watch their presentation on [HUD’s Office Hours from April 23, 2021](#).