



Na Leo Ola

Newsletter of the Hawai'i Medical Association

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Hawai'i Legislative Session Opens

The 33rd session of the Hawai'i State Legislature officially opened on Wednesday, January 21, 2026, and HMA was there to meet key legislators, renew old acquaintances, and share our legislative priorities for 2026.

Advocacy for Hawai'i physicians is the main function of HMA, and to prepare for each new legislative session, we poll our membership to discover the priorities they find most important. From that, HMA designs its legislative priorities for the session, and shares these priorities with every legislator.

Meet our HMA Public Policy Committee for 2026:

- Elizabeth Ann Ignacio, MD - Chair
- Robert Carlisle, MD & Christina Marzo, MD - Vice Chairs
- Linda Rosehill, JD - Government Relations
- Marc Alexander, Executive Director

Our team will be working diligently to ensure our legislative priorities are known to all members of the House and Senate, and will track the bills and resolutions that affect healthcare in Hawai'i.

You can read the legislative priorities report shared with each legislator on page two of this newsletter. You can also find it on the HMA website by visiting hawaiiomedicalassociation.org.

President's Message

by Nadine Tenn Salle, MD



It is difficult to imagine a time when physicians have needed a safe, trusted space more than we do right now.

Across the nation - and here in Hawai'i - healthcare is changing rapidly. Consolidation, workforce shortages, rising administrative burden, and shifting models of care are no longer distant policy discussions. They show up every day in how we care for patients. Decisions that affect our practice are being considered quickly and at a high level, often without enough physician input.

Recent headlines read: Hawai'i Pacific Health and HMSA announce plans to move forward with an affiliation. The premise underlying this and other industry changes is clear - healthcare in Hawai'i is on an unsustainable path.

But that headline should not end the conversation. It should begin a broader one.

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Hawai'i Medical Association 2026 Legislative Priorities

Access to Care

In Hawai'i, federal Medicaid funding reductions, combined with rising healthcare costs, threaten access to care across the state. Medicaid is a critical source of coverage for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities, kūpuna, individuals with disabilities, and residents of neighbor islands, where provider shortages already limit access. Looming coverage losses, benefit reductions, and increased cost-sharing for patients, combined with higher premiums and out-of-pocket costs, are driving more residents into uninsured or underinsured status, delaying care and increasing reliance on emergency departments. These impacts are disproportionately felt on neighbor islands, and in underrepresented communities, that face higher rates of chronic disease and health disparities.

The Hawai'i Medical Association supports mitigation strategies for federal cuts; patient support and navigation services that help individuals understand and maintain coverage and the vital social safety net; protections for patient continuity of care; increased workforce capacity, particularly on neighbor islands; reduction of avoidable, higher-cost utilization; all while ensuring the long-term sustainability of Hawai'i's healthcare systems.

Quality Care

All patients deserve high quality care, regardless of their economic status or geographic location. Team-based healthcare led by physicians, should remain the standard of care in Hawai'i, ensuring coordinated, high-quality, and patient-centered services. All healthcare professionals should deliver care within the scope of their training, education, and demonstrated competencies, supported by appropriate supervision and collaboration.

As healthcare delivery evolves, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and digital health tools must be transparent, evidence-based, and designed to support - not replace - clinical judgment. Patients should be clearly informed when AI tools, including chatbots or automated decision-support systems, are used in their care, and all innovation must meet standards for accuracy, privacy, and patient safety.

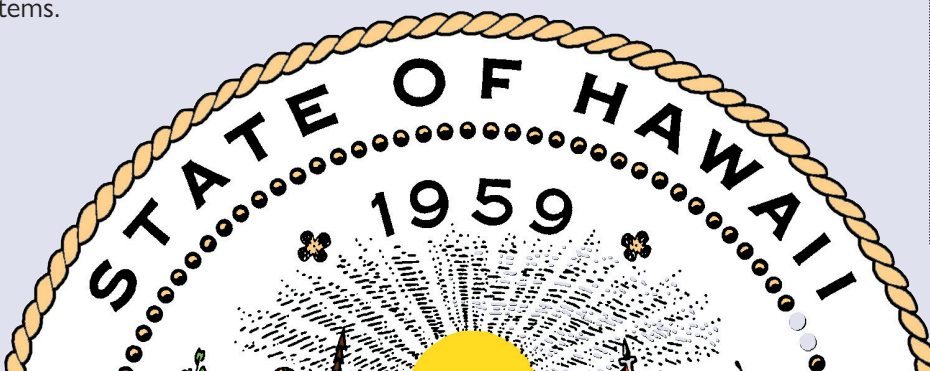
Behavioral Health

Approximately 23% of Hawai'i adults report any mental illness (AMI), but only 45% - 50% of those adults receive treatment, leaving roughly 200,000+ adults with AMI untreated. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander adults reporting a mental health condition are less likely to receive treatment than White adults (16% vs 24%), highlighting racial/ethnic disparities.

While there have been improvements in overall state rankings, recent reports indicate both an increased need for behavioral health services, and persistent geographic and cultural disparities in access to care.

HMA strongly supports advanced care quality and investments for high standard Behavioral Health Integration, including emerging community behavioral health services for mental health and substance use disorders. HMA opposes the expansion of prescriptive authority to healthcare professionals without essential medical education and experience, to safely manage the significant risks, side effects, and interactions of powerful drugs.

Notably, as housing instability and homelessness are key social determinants of health that are closely linked to higher rates of substance use and psychiatric disorders, substance use disorders, HMA also supports housing solutions accompanied by comprehensive wrap-around support services for individuals experiencing homelessness.



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As physicians, we must ask: What discussions should be happening alongside these structural changes? What perspectives need to be heard from different specialties, from neighbor islands, from hospital-based physicians, private practices, rural clinics, and safety-net settings? What is working - and what is not - depending on how and where we practice?

The Hawai'i Medical Association exists for moments like this. HMA is not a decision-making body. It is a container - a place where physicians can come together to listen, build relationships, and speak honestly about the realities of practicing medicine in Hawai'i. It is where we can ask hard questions together,

grounded in lived clinical experience. Physician colleagues, I invite your thoughts:

- What changes need to happen now to make practicing medicine in Hawai'i sustainable?
- How do we meaningfully reduce administrative burden?
- What would it take to eliminate or reform prior authorization?
- Is there a role for more uniform or universal billing structures?
- How do we improve Medicaid administration so it better supports patients and clinicians alike?

The physician voice is strongest when it is collective. Organizing that voice begins with showing up - to meetings, forums, and conversations with colleagues across islands and specialties.

I encourage physicians to consider committing to HMA membership for at least two years. Give yourself time to listen, engage, and understand the breadth of perspectives within our profession. This is how trust forms. This is how alignment begins. Hawai'i's healthcare future should not be shaped without the voices of those who practice medicine here. Together, we can help ensure that care in our state remains equitable, patient-centered, and grounded in the values that brought us to medicine.

I invite you to be part of that work.

Your colleague,

Nadine Tenn Salle, MD
*President of your
Hawaii Medical Association*

Be Ready for the New GE Tax Exemption

A major victory for HMA was the passage of SB1035. This measure exempts hospitals, infirmaries, medical clinics, health care facilities, pharmacies, and medical and dental providers from General Excise Tax (GET) on goods and services that are reimbursed through Medicare, Medicaid or TRICARE. It was unanimously passed by both the Hawaii House and Senate, and signed into law on June 3, 2024 by HMA member Governor Josh Green.

Now called Act 47, the tax exemption went into effect on January 1, 2026. We want our members - and all healthcare professionals - to take full advantage of this new tax law.

We've posted the latest information on Act 47 on our website. There, you can find a link to the forms you'll need to claim the exemption. You can also access a video conversation - co-sponsored by the Hawaii / Pacific Basin Area Health Education Center (AHEC), JABSOM, and HMA - with Garrison Kurth of the Hawaii Department of Taxation. Mr. Kurth explained the new act, and answered questions posed by our membership. This very informative conversation touched on many different nuances of the exemption.

Visit hawaiimedicalassociation.org, go to the Advocacy tab at the top, and click on GET Reform for the latest information.

HMA Members Receive Special Honors

HMA members comprise some of the best and brightest physicians in Hawai'i, and we're proud to share their achievements and honors:

Helen Blaisdell-Brennan, MD has been elected as a Distinguished Fellow of the American Psychiatric Association (APA). Dr. Blaisdell-Brennan was also honored by the APA as a Mental Health Equity Champion.

Laeton Pang, MD has been selected to receive a Gold Medal Award at the American College of Radiation Oncology (ACRO) Summit & Annual Meeting on February 6, 2026.

Hawai‘i Receives \$189M Grant to Transform Rural Health

On Dec. 29, 2025, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) awarded Hawai‘i \$188,892,440 for Federal fiscal year 2026 through the **Rural Health Transformation Program (RHTP)**. The RHTP is a \$50 billion, five-year fund created by Act H.R.1, awarded to all 50 states through a competitive application process.

With the large grant from the RHTP, combined with the new GET tax exemption, we’re hoping to see better health outcomes for Hawai‘i’s most vulnerable populations. Notes HMA member **Kelley Withy, MD**, Director of the Hawaii / Pacific Basin Area Health Education Center, “My hope is that we can provide enough training, scholarships and incentives to rural healthcare workers to fully staff the rural areas of Hawaii.”

The five-year plan seeks to transform the rural health care delivery system in a sustainable manner that will improve healthcare access, quality, and outcomes for the rural population that comprise 40.8% of the state (all neighbor islands and rural parts of Oahu). The plan is built around six interconnected initiatives:

Rural Health Information Network (RHIN) - A statewide digital backbone connecting rural hospitals, clinics and health centers through interoperable electronic health records, secure wireless networks, referral systems and shared data platforms.

Pili Ola Telehealth Network - A statewide telehealth system expanding virtual care by deploying access points in schools, libraries, workplaces and community centers, supported by telehealth navigators and remote patient monitoring.

Rural Infrastructure for Care Access (RICA) - Expansion of emergency medical services, mobile healthcare, community paramedicine and behavioral health capacity, including a real-time statewide emergency and trauma coordination center.

HOME RUN: Rural Healthcare Workforce Pipeline - New rural training sites, residencies, nursing transition-to-practice programs, high-school healthcare certificates, scholarships and incentives to recruit and retain healthcare professionals.

Rural Respite Network - Five new medical respite centers in Kaua‘i, Maui, Kona, Hilo and Wai‘anae to reduce preventable hospital stays and support recovery for patients experiencing homelessness or post-acute medical needs.

Rural Value-Based Innovation and AHEAD Readiness Fund - A competitive fund helping rural providers adopt value-based care and population-health models, preparing Hawai‘i for the CMS AHEAD payment system.

For the latest updates and details on RHTP, please visit the Engage Hawaii website at engage.hawaii.gov/rhtp.

Executive Director’s Message *by Marc Alexander*



Why Physicians Should Join the Hawai‘i Medical Association

Hawai‘i’s healthcare system

faces ongoing challenges, including workforce shortages, high costs, and significant health disparities. The Hawai‘i Medical Association (HMA) provides physicians with a unified, effective voice to influence state policy and strengthen care across the islands.

HMA advocates for reforms that support both patients and physicians - such as higher Medicaid reimbursement, streamlined prior authorization, expanded telehealth, and stronger loan repayment programs. Recent legislative successes include increased Medicaid rates and the passage of a General Excise Tax exemption for medical services, reducing overhead costs for practices and improving access to care.

As rising costs and funding pressures threaten services statewide, especially on neighbor islands, physician engagement is essential. Through collaboration with the American Medical Association, HMA ensures Hawai‘i’s priorities are also represented nationally, and that HMA has access to the most up-to-date practice and policy resources.

Joining HMA provides timely legislative updates, advocacy resources, and opportunities to influence health policy. Add your voice - join HMA today at hawaiiomedicalassociation.org and help shape the future of healthcare in Hawai‘i.