Improving Hawaii’s Health

Focusing on vulnerable and underserved populations, Kaiser Permanente provides support to many nonprofit organizations to uplift the community’s overall health and well-being.
Social factors have a big impact on health and well-being. For instance, job instability can compromise a healthy lifestyle and lead to food and shelter issues. Homelessness further deteriorates one’s well-being, and chronic homelessness often leads to an early death.

Known locally and nationally as a high quality, affordable health care provider, Kaiser Permanente’s care extends beyond its hospital walls by investing in Hawai‘i organizations to address issues of housing and homelessness, food security, and economic opportunity. It believes that good health is a fundamental right and is focused on making a difference.

Ending Veteran Homelessness

Born and raised in Hawai‘i, Staff Sergeant Sterling Beair had difficulties assimilating to everyday civilian life when he completed service and returned home. For 10 years, he worked as a U.S. Army combat medic in Iraq and other missions and was suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.

Beair eventually found himself homeless for two years and then was incarcerated. That’s when he was connected to U.S.VETS, whose mission is to end veteran homelessness.

“He put his heart and soul into the program,” says Gregory Williams, executive director of U.S.VETS Barbers Point at Kalaeloa. “He got his associate, bachelor’s, got his master’s, started a career as a therapist, and then within the last year and a half was elected to the national board of directors for U.S.VETS.”

Not all veteran stories are as successful as Beair’s but U.S.VETS is there to support any veterans who gave of themselves to serve the country, should they need the help to regain their independence.

U.S.VETS’ ultimate goal is to keep veterans in permanent housing, and that requires a commitment from the veteran to do the work in addressing their personal challenges, whether that’s getting a better job, anger management issues, or substance abuse.

“I would say that no veteran that comes to us is without some kind of issue that they’re dealing with,” says Williams. “I wouldn’t necessarily say there’s a 100% correlation between those issues and the reason why they’re homeless, but for sure, those are definitely contributing factors.

“Kaiser Permanente generously awarded a grant for nursing support,” says Williams.

To support the health and wellness of homeless veterans, Kaiser Permanente awarded U.S.VETS a grant that staffs a full-time nurse at its facilities in Barbers Point and Wai‘anae. The nurse also visits Kama‘okū Kauhale village, a tiny-home community for homeless civilians and veterans that U.S.VETS operates in Kalaeloa.

The nurse provides health education and advice for minor medical issues that may include encouragement to visit a doctor or hospital. The hope in the future is to bring a doctor on full time or at least schedule visits once a month.

Like Beair, many of the veterans who live in Hawai‘i have some connection with the Islands and have probably served in Hawai‘i at some point in their career.

On O‘ahu, there were 3,951 people experiencing homelessness, and veterans make up 7% of the adults, according to Partners In Care’s March 10, 2022 Point In Time Count. Partners In Care performs the count annually to learn more about the homeless population and determines
During one-day homeless counts in 2022, these were the number of individuals across the Islands who were homeless, either sheltered or unsheltered.

(Source: Partners In Care Oahu Continuum of Care's Point In Time Count held on Mar. 10, 2022; Bridging the Gap Continuum of Care Homeless Point In Time Count Jan. 23, 2022)

what solutions are needed.

“Most of our veterans who are experiencing homelessness are single, and a majority of them are also men,” says Laura Thielen, executive director of Partners In Care, a coalition of organizations dedicated to eliminating homelessness.

The 2022 report showed some positive news. Veteran homelessness decreased by 57% since 2015 and 44% since 2020. It’s believed to be due to increased efforts to house veterans through the “Mayor’s Challenge,” a national initiative Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell accepted in 2015, and the “Built for Zero” movement, started by national nonprofit Community Solutions.

Kaiser Permanente has actively participated in these efforts, as well as with local nonprofits such as U.S.VETS and Partners In Care.

“Many of them have trouble going through the VA [Veterans Affairs] system. It’s a complex system and there’s a lot of waiting, so that’s one of the big issues that we’ve seen is there may be services available to folks, but they have to wait a long time,” says Thielen. “That’s where the landlord engagement program and other programs we run really helps them.”

Partners In Care’s landlord engagement program finds landlords on the island who are willing to rent units to homeless individuals. In its three years, the program has assisted over 1,000 individuals get into housing.

Kaiser Permanente funds a landlord engagement program specialist specifically for veterans. Seanya Nakapalau, who’s been working in the human services field for 12 years, has worked in the position for a year. Last month, she assisted six veterans, including one family.

Her work entails screening veterans, finding housing, doing home tours, and working on relationships with landlords. The stigma of her homeless veterans sometimes makes it more difficult to house them, so she’s always searching for new landlords who are willing to work with them or decide to have a change of heart.

“Our job takes a lot of advocating and sometimes it can be more difficult to match a specific situation to a landlord,” says Nakapalau. She says the program offers incentives for landlords and points out that veterans have a consistent source of military benefits that can help pay rent. The specialist is there to help with any concerns, too.

“Some of the stories that my veterans share of how they got to this situation is very disheartening,” says Nakapalau. “I do think that some of them have a harder time getting housed because of all the trauma that they faced.”

When there is a suitable match for a veteran, though, she finds joy in the program’s success. “Going through the process with them, getting to know them and their stories, and then actually housing them is an amazing feeling,” Nakapalau says.
Turning Children’s Lives Around

“T
ey weren’t born bad,” says Deborah Spencer-Chun, president and CEO of Adult Friends for Youth. “Circumstances happened to them along the way and so our work is to peel the layers and get to the core of who they really are. They’re really loving and really good kids and very respectful actually.”

Youth exposed to situations beyond their control, such as domestic violence, homelessness, and financial challenges, have a higher probability of dropping out of school or not continuing on to college. Offering support and guidance, Hawai‘i non-profits, like Adults Friends for Youth, are there to help turn things around.

Creating Positive Pathways

With a mission to stop violence and create a peaceful community, Adult Friends for Youth serves 600 kids who voluntarily joined its programs on O‘ahu.

“Many of our kids are already engaged in some type of destructive behavior,” says Spencer-Chun. “A lot of them think we’re the police or someone they’re not sure about because they’ve had so many people in their lives, but we’re consistent.

We keep coming back.”

The nonprofit has a 32-week curriculum over four years that’s tailored to each child’s needs, including healing from trauma, coping skills, and communication. It also discusses life after high school with the youth and helps them create a path forward, whether that’s in college, vocational school or the military.

“We’ve been real fortunate because a private foundation such as Kaiser Permanente has really stepped up, especially during the pandemic,” says Spencer-Chun.

Kaiser Permanente supports Adult Friends for Youth through a grant it provides for redirectional therapy. Half, or 300, of its kids take part in this form of group counseling.

“As long as they can redirect the negative behavior they have built along the way, if that can change, then the sky’s the limit for them,”
says Spencer-Chun. “Success is not measured by money but by how happy they are, how much better they’re feeling about their lives now and how they’re trying to strive to do better.”

Another organization supporting youth in communities, Partners in Development Foundation helps foster kids by training local families and relatives who can take them in; runs a safe house for adjudicated boys; and cares for the 5-acre Kupa ‘Aina Farm on the grounds of the Hawai‘i Youth Correctional Facility, which has been renamed to the Kawaiola Youth & Family Wellness Center.

As part of a program, Kupa ‘Aina Farm programming offers minors from the correctional facility, as well as other youth, the opportunity to work on the farm, learn about food nutrition, and enjoy being in the outdoor space.

“All of our staff are trauma-informed and they support the youth by mentoring them and helping to grow positive behaviors,” says Shawn Kana‘iaupuni, president and CEO of Partners in Development Foundation. It also provides youth an opportunity to develop career skills by working on the farm.

“It provides a little bit of cushion where they can practice a bit before they go out and get that regular job,” says Kana‘iaupuni. “We’re able to support youth to become engaged as positive community contributors by supporting their workforce readiness and skills development.”

More Support to Lean On

Coming from financially challenging situations, children’s basic needs are addressed at the Boys & Girls Club, such as providing food or offering a safe space to decompress, so the kids can turn their focus on the future and having a successful life.

“Eighty-two percent of our children come from what are designated as low to very-low income families. We always try to have a healthy snack or preferably a hot meal when they arrive after school,” says Paddy Kauhane, president and CEO of Boys & Girls Club of Hawai‘i, which covers O‘ahu and Kaua‘i. Teens make up almost half of its members at 45%.

“One of the reasons we do that is kids who are hungry don’t learn as well. Kids who have full tummies are able to focus and concentrate better. For some of our kids, the last meal they have of the day is often in our clubs.”

Kaiser Permanente has been a supporter of its healthy living and athletics programs in the past, but in 2020, it started funding the club’s What’s Next program, too. The new program is for kids specifically who have higher needs and less resources than others.

“We bring them in, we start them at grade nine, and they go all the way through, in the same pod until they graduate high school,” says Kauhane. “Through those years, from nine to 12, we start to really intensely work on social and emotional learning, workforce development, career clusters, and applications for scholarships.”

The program has also taken the kids, some of whom have never left Hawai‘i, to the mainland to visit colleges. Following high school graduation, the club keeps track of the kids who have gone on to college or trade school, and helps them return home to visit families during breaks.

“The beautiful thing that’s happening now is these kids are attending college, and when they do come home, they’re actually working for the clubs now as interns during their summer breaks. So they get to earn money and still reconnect, and they also become adult mentors,” says Kauhane.

Similarly, the Boys & Girls Club on Maui has three major core program areas, including academic enrichment,
character and leadership and healthy living. One of its goals is to focus on inclusion so as to increase teen engagement in programs and give opportunities for them to be a part of planning for activities and events, such as its annual Teen Expo, so they have a voice.

“Over the years, Kaiser Permanente has worked with us, supported our programs, our events, and in the past supported our big chef event which promotes culinary career explorations working with our little chefs and big chefs of Hawai‘i,” says Kelly Maluo-Pearson, CEO of Boys & Girls Club of Maui.

**Cultivating Teen Leaders**

Kaiser Permanente awarded a grant to Boys & Girls Club of Maui to support its leaders in training program, which gives teens healthy activities to engage in with topics of how to be leaders, social emotional learning, tobacco and vaping prevention and awareness, and healthy alternatives to drugs and alcohol.

“The leadership development is very important because what we’re trying to do is make sure that they really do understand and feel confident that they can do whatever they desire to do in life after they leave our clubs,” says Maluo-Pearson.

At the club, teens create resumes, do mock interviews, participate in club service and service outside the community, understand financial literacy, and explore different career pathways. This is also the first year the club will be sending a group of teens to the national Boys & Girls Club leadership development conference in California.

“We want them to be successful in their lives,” says TJ Daya, director of operations for the Lahaina Boys & Girls Club. “We want them to be happy in their lives and realize they can achieve anything they want if we provide them with the tools.”

**Advocacy for Maui Businesses**

Building wealth and creating jobs is integral to the physical and mental well-being of the community, and the Maui Economic Development Board (MEDB) is focusing efforts on underserved populations.

The MEDB, whose mission is to inspire innovation in business, education and community in Maui County, received a grant from the National Association for Latino Community Asset Builders funded by Kaiser Permanente. The grant has traditionally been used for the Latino community, but because its population is small in Hawai‘i compared to other states, the grant opportunity expanded to include all vulnerable populations, such as the Native Hawaiian, Filipino, and Micronesian populations.

“Kaiser Permanente wanted to make sure this kind of community asset development was happening in Hawai‘i,” says Leslie Wilkins, president and CEO of MEDB. “It really led us to focus on those underserved communities in our business outreach and development.”

The grants been used to work with community members and help businesses get fiscal infrastructure so they can continue to grow. MEDB also coaches on business reorganization and how to move into ecommerce.

“It’s so amazing how Kaiser Permanente doesn’t just invest in our physical and mental health, but they invest in the health of a community,” says Wilkins.
Everyone has the right to thrive

At Kaiser Permanente, our goal is to be the champion of health care in Hawaii. That’s why our commitment to total health extends beyond the doctor’s office to improving the well-being of the communities we serve. Our partnerships in the public and private sector make an impact on people, policies, and places across our island home.

Together, we can build healthier communities and make wellness achievable so everyone in Hawaii can thrive.
Kaiser Permanente
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We’re grateful for our partnerships in the community: the organizations and individuals that champion total health, address the needs of vulnerable populations, and create policies that enable communities to thrive. It’s our privilege to care for the people of Hawaii.

Mahalo and aloha.
Kaiser Permanente Hawaii