

Always There to Serve Community

By Vern Hara

EMS 2020 week was May 17 to May 23. The theme this year was "Ready Today. Preparing for Tomorrow." Community First would like to recognize the work of EMS professionals and their Community Paramedicine Program and patient care during the last several months. Me and my team are actively involved in identifying, assessing, and connecting medically fragile individuals to Hawaii Fire Department services, making it safe for kupuna to age in their homes.

When COVID-19 arrived, it forever changed our way of life. Undoubtedly, the 2020 coronavirus pandemic will impact us for generations to come. In addition to responding to everyday emergencies like heart attacks, strokes and automobile accidents, EMS professionals had to respond to this unprecedented crisis. We worked together on the front lines every day to support the health and well-being of our community.

In our community, the spirit of aloha cultivates a sense of belonging here in Hawaii. Aloha is not just spoken; it is felt with the heart. We show love and kindness with hugs and handshakes.

With COVID-19, emergency proclamations were issued, and social distancing became the new normal. Now, we must remember masks in addition to coupons for trips to the grocery store. Many businesses remain closed- some temporarily, some for good. Gatherings of more than 10 people are prohibited. This is not an easy task living in a close-knit culture where friends are considered family.

Graduation season is upon us, and traditional commencement ceremonies have been replaced with drive-through ceremonies and virtual celebrations. This is a shock to island culture as we shift from hugs and honis to distant shakas and smiles concealed by masks. It takes conscious effort to unlearn our habits and express aloha six feet apart.

COVID-19 posed unique challenges for HFD as social distancing cannot apply when your duty is to provide patient care. Our first responders had many questions about how to provide care and maintain personal safety. Though our personnel are well trained in hygiene practices, policies and procedures regarding proper PPE usage and decontamination, after each patient contact was stressed more than ever. Procedures to conduct basic patient assessments were modified to ensure the least amount of exposure. Administering aerosolized medications were no longer recommended because of close contact in circulated air. These are examples of how we were forced to shift mindsets, adapt to new strategies, and overcome obstacles that COVID-19 presents. We have had a smooth transition into our new normal work practices thus far.

Because of a heightened awareness of the value of a strong immune system from the crisis, our department personnel are motivated to engage in healthy activities. We've increased our physical activity- walking, cycling and designing home gyms. We are also spending more quality time with our families without the commitments from school and organized sports schedules. We're

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exploring new interests like gardening, home improvement projects, and CrossFit. Incorporating physical activity, engaging in new hobbies, and maintaining a positive perspective will keep us healthy and strong to meet the challenge of reopening and any future surges.

First responders take an inherent risk at the beginning of every shift. Part of our vision statement states, "We are a team of highly skilled and motivated men and women committed to providing the highest quality of protection to life and property."

COVID-19 has tested our capacity to serve. The harsh reality is that people fall ill, experience trauma and need assistance. No matter the trials and circumstances before us, HFD is dedicated to serving the people of Hawaii County and all who may call on us. I am proud to be part of the Hawaii Fire Department, and I am incredibly humbled by the performance and allegiance of my front-line brothers and sisters here and across the globe.

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*This column was prepared by Community First, a nonprofit established to help the community respond to the health-care cost crisis and support initiatives that change health care from just treating disease to caring for health.*