

Vaccinate to get our Island Businesses Healthy Again

By Miles Yoshioka, Hawaii Island Chamber of Commerce Executive Director and Toby Taniguchi, President of KTA Super Stores and the Hawaii Island Chamber of Commerce.

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, our Island businesses have struggled. We've seen some of our local businesses pivot their models and actually prosper during the pandemic. We've seen other businesses that had to shutter after a combination of insurmountable factors. The pandemic has caused a massive shift in the way that we do business. Now our local businesses are ready for a comeback. Like the rest of us, they are ready to take a deep breath and get back to work. And as soon as our community can reach herd immunity, that's exactly what they're going to do. Getting vaccinated and the success of our Island's businesses are inextricably linked -- without it, we will have a much more difficult time moving on from this pandemic.

Many of our members at the Hawaii Island Chamber of Commerce have already seen benefits of vaccination.

At HPM Building Supply, COO Adam Bauer said, "When COVID-19 hit, we implemented safety protocols early on, like six feet distancing, masking, face shields, enhanced cleaning procedures and plexiglass shields. When vaccines became available, we created a program 'Sleeve up, Eat up' giving \$50 gift cards to local grocery stores. We also quickly implemented a wellness app that employees use daily to check for and report symptoms of illness." Vaccination, however, is the strongest weapon in their arsenal against COVID-19, and they have vaccinated 62% of their employees. One of the biggest benefits that HPM leadership has noticed is that vaccination allows their employees to once again travel, allowing them to visit family members that they haven't seen for many months. This has been a much-needed morale boost that translates to a healthy and active workforce.

The Most Irresistible Shop in Hilo, owner Tracie Yoshimoto said, "I am so grateful to the amazing outreach by local healthcare providers, like KTA Pharmacy, Hilo Medical Center, and Bay Clinic, who continue to work tirelessly to vaccinate our community. Now that our employees are vaccinated and more of the community becomes fully vaccinated, it has definitely given me relief about the safety and wellbeing of my team and customers. There's more foot traffic as people feel more confident to venture out. I'm hopeful more of our community will choose to get vaccinated - not just for themselves, but for the community as a whole so we can reclaim our sense of normalcy, which will lead to small businesses regaining their health."

Even as far as we've come as a community, there are still some local businesses that remain closed or operating at much lower capacities. These small businesses belong to and employ our neighbors, our family, our friends. It's these businesses that will continue to suffer until we all

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work together as a community to help keep everyone safe. Statewide as of May 25 49% of the population 12 years and older have been fully vaccinated. On our Island only 41% have been fully vaccinated. Let's all do our part to make sure that we don't lose any more people or businesses to this virus and show just how resilient Hawai'i Island can be. Let's get 70% of our residents vaccinated as soon as possible and get back to normal. Let's make getting vaccinated Our Kuleana.

Community First serves as a neutral forum for the community to come together and as a catalyst for solutions to improve health and lower medical costs on Hawaii Island