

Doing What It Takes to Keep Ka'u Healthy

By Stacyn Sakuma, KRHCAI President and auntie Jessie Marques, Executive Director

Ka'u Rural Health Community Association Inc. (KRHCAI) is the FIRST and ONLY "Community" Rural Health Association in the United States. We are a community-based organization in Ka'u that serves a rural, medically underserved, economically distressed, diverse, vulnerable and marginalized population of 9,000. Our all-volunteer board members have generations of family roots, who live or work in the District of Ka'u. Puanani Woo, property owner / landlord, provided a 20-year lease for the location of our office buildings at the Resource & Distance Learning Center in Pahala. Ms. Woo's support and interest is based on generations of her family living in Ka'u, and the desire to improve the quality of life for keiki, kupuna and the community.

In November 1998, KRHCAI was formally established as a 501 C (3) nonprofit community-based member organization to preserve access to healthcare. Over the past 24 years KRHCAI has collaborated and partnered with many public / private sectors to promote health, education, research, and economic sustainability. We played an important role in preventing Ka'u Hospital's emergency room from closure. Between 2016-2018, these partnerships resulted in certified nurse aide (CNA), licensed practical nurse (LPN), and community health worker (CHW) graduates becoming a part of the healthcare workforce, and productive citizens in our local communities. There were twenty CNA, ten CHW, and four LPN in the cohort. Of this, 50% of graduates, including two registered nurses, were hired at local hospitals and healthcare facilities.

The COVID-19 pandemic changed KRHCAI's ability to provide in person education programs, workshops, training, telehealth, or support groups at the Resource & Distance Learning Center. Despite being a small nonprofit with limited income, our program staff adapted by working remotely and continuing to provide community outreach. KRHCAI did what it took to keep our community healthy by partnering with public and private sectors to host vaccine clinics, testing sites, education, training, and distributing over 10,000 masks and 600 home test kits.

KRHCAI would like to mahalo many of our partners who contributed to the success of our programs, which include Alu Like Workforce & Training, Bay Clinic Inc., Civil Defense, Community First, Department of Health, Hawai'i County Mayor's Office, Hawai'i District Health Office, State Office of Rural Health, Hawai'i Institute of Public Health, Hawai'i National Guard, Hilo Medical Center, Hui Mālama Ola Nā Ōiwi, John A. Burns School of Medicine, Kaiser Permanente, Ka'u Hospital & Rural Health Clinic, Ka'u Intermediate & High School, KTA Super Stores, L&G Labs, Mala I'a LLC, Marshallese Churches and Community leaders, Morehouse School of Medicine, Naalehu Elementary National Coalition of Resilience Network, Pacific Area Health Education Center, Papa Ola Lokahi, Planning, Program & Policy, Premier Medical Group,

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Queen's North Hawaii Community Hospital, National Association of Community Health Workers, University of Hawaii/Hawaii Community College, Vibrant Hawai'i, and West Hawai'i Community Health Center.

In 2022 KRHCAI is excited to announce a new partnership with Ka'u High School Ka'u Global Learning Lab (KGLL) Health Career Pathway Program, working with youth, families and community to promote education, health literacy, science and workforce development.

KRHCAI board of directors and staff want to acknowledge our dedicated advisory board, membership, volunteers, and donors, for being instrumental in sustaining our organization over the past 24 years, and for their commitment to carrying out our mission.

Community First is a 501 (c) 3 non-profit founded by the late Barry Taniguchi in 2014 to serve as a neutral forum for the community to come together, and as a catalyst for solutions to improve health and access to health care.