

Honoring the memory of Barry Taniguchi

By Lisa Rantz

We are still mourning the loss of Barry Taniguchi, who demonstrated so much love and leadership for our community, and I would like to offer one way we can honor his memory — the Barry Taniguchi Community First Health Professions Subsidy Program — and explain its purpose and origin.

Recruiting and retaining physicians was one of the major initiatives Barry worked on through Community First, a nonprofit he founded and headed.

In April 2015, Barry invited me to join Community First's Regional Health Improvement Collaborative, which brought together institutions and members of our community to address major health care issues on our island home such as cost and access. His vision was broad and deep, seeking to transform business models and shift the idea of health care from treating disease to caring for health.

I was asked to work on obtaining a Health Professions Shortage Designation (HPSA) for Hawaii County. The HPSA designation allows access to loan repayment programs and a 10% quarterly bonus payment to doctors for Medicare direct-billed services.

Although it took more than two years, Barry was always my biggest supporter. He knew it would make an impactful difference for our community.

While working on the HPSA, I became chair of Community First's Recruitment and Retention committee, which administers a fund to help doctors set up practices in East Hawaii. Our committee has awarded two subsidies to assist new doctors get their practices up and running in East Hawaii.

Thanks to Barry, I was nominated by Dr. Jerris Hedges, dean of the John A. Burns School of Medicine, and appointed by Gov. David Ige to the Hawaii Medical Education Council, which oversees all graduate medical education programs in the state of Hawaii. Part of the purpose of the appointment was to establish rural training opportunities in East Hawaii.

At my first meeting, the council began to discuss the Hawaii State Loan Repayment Program, which provides loan repayment to health professionals who work at nonprofits. Doctors with educational debt who are in solo or small practices, caring for our community and struggling financially, should receive the same benefits, so I asked if it was possible for a nonprofit to provide the match, instead of the federal government.

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We created the Solo and Small Practice pilot project to help doctors in private practice. Community First provided a match for a doctor in East Hawaii, and other entities followed our lead by providing matching funds for doctors on Kauai and Maui.

In July, Community First suggested transferring the Recruit and Retain Physician Initiative to the Hilo Medical Center Foundation as this activity was directly aligned with our mission. Later, Barry and I were at an event and he thanked me for agreeing to administer the subsidy program. I told him that after all he has done for me, it was my honor to take on the program, and I had an idea: I would like to partner with Hawaii State Rural Health Association and grow the program to support not only East Hawaii, but all of the rural areas of Hawaii.

I told him that I wanted to create a legacy program in his name, and Barry reached across the table, placed his hand across my forearm, and responded very quietly that it would be his honor. At that moment, the Barry Taniguchi Community First Health Professions Subsidy Program was born.

My heart is filled with sadness over the loss of Barry, but also with an extraordinary sense of purpose: to fulfill his vision and provide access to affordable health care close to home.

For more information on the Barry Taniguchi Community First Health Professions Subsidy Program, please contact me at the Hilo Medical Center Foundation, (808) 932-3636.

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