

Executive Summary

Why Access to Healthcare Matters

Access to health care plays a vital role in the health of both individuals and populations. According to the Institute of Medicine (1993) “access to healthcare is the timely use of personal health services to achieve the best possible health outcomes.”¹ Access to healthcare is influenced by whether there is an adequate health provider workforce, whether residents have insurance, travel times, language and cultural barriers, and the price of care. Barriers in any of these areas can result in lack of access, delays in care, higher costs and worse outcomes. Population health research by Harvard and Johns Hopkins Universities shows a clear link between better access to primary care, with a higher ratio of primary care providers to the population, and lower death rates.² The Center for Disease Control documents that communities with poorer access to coordinated primary care tend to have higher costs and higher rates of “potentially preventable hospitalizations”.³

Large Health Disparities and Large Provider Shortages in Hawaii County

Hawaii County has higher death rates in many categories and lower life expectancy compared to the other counties in Hawaii.^{4, 5} The Hawaii County healthcare provider shortage is also documented to be worse than elsewhere in Hawaii.⁶ The provider shortage is a key barrier to health care access in Hawaii County and a key reason for the higher death rates, and higher costs. Additional reasons for the large health disparities in Hawaii County are related to economic disparities as well as higher smoking and obesity rates. The aging population and aging workforce will make this access problem worse.

Over the past ten years there has been a growing shortage of primary care providers in Hawaii County such that Hawaii County is now about 34% short of primary care providers.⁶ Many Big Island physicians have left practice. Many have moved to the mainland, where their incomes are substantially better, and they have better access to quality public schools.⁶ Many Big Island residents do not have a primary care provider or usual source of care and too many residents delay care and/or use the Emergency Department. This is linked with lower cancer screening rates, higher complications from chronic diseases - such as diabetes - and higher costs from higher hospital utilization.

The access to care problem has grown to the point that the last two Hawaii County Mayor’s both held health summits to increase focus on the critical situation. Following the Hawaii County 2007 Health Summit, several health leaders formed a voluntary group of stakeholders - the *Hawaii Island Healthcare Alliance* - to collaboratively address the growing healthcare access problem in Hawaii County. Members include representatives from provider organizations, hospital CEOs, Federally Qualified Health Center CEOs, insurers, SHPDA, government, workforce investment, University of Hawaii (UH) Hilo School of Pharmacy, UH John A. Burns School of Medicine, and business and community organizations.⁷

Benefits of Growing the Primary Care Provider Supply

There is strong evidence that growing the primary care provider workforce will reduce death rates, reduce potentially avoidable Emergency Department and hospital utilization; grow the job market, and help to grow the economy⁸. According to one analysis (Macinko et al., 2007) for each increase of one primary care physician per 10,000 population, there is an associated reduction in the average mortality by 5.3%.⁹ According to the Lewin Group, the average number of jobs supported by office based physicians in Hawaii State is 5.8 jobs.^{9,10}

The data in this report, although incomplete, is intended to document the growing problem. The recommendations are intended to serve as a call to action, by the many stakeholders impacted, to collaboratively address the provider shortage in Hawaii County. The benefits will be many.