



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

DAVID Y. IGE

GOVERNOR

ELIZABETH A. CHAR, MD

DIRECTOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 19, 2020

20-075

Hawai'i Beach Safety Week is Sept. 20-26

HONOLULU – The Hawai'i Department of Health (DOH) is recognizing drowning prevention efforts across our islands as the state observes Hawai'i Beach Safety Week on Sept. 20-26. This week is dedicated to Hawai'i Drowning and Aquatic Injury Prevention Advisory Committee member and long-time water safety advocate Ray Sanborn, who passed away unexpectedly last week. Sanborn was a founding member of the advisory committee and enthusiastic contributor to drowning prevention efforts for decades. Sanborn was president and CEO of Kama'aina Kids.

While the annual on-scene beach safety events such as State Ocean Safety Conference and Jr. Lifeguard Championships have been canceled due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a statewide campaign, "Ocean Safety Amidst a Pandemic: Keeping your Ohana Safe," will showcase radio spots and other safety messaging from water safety officials in each county. The counties and the Drowning and Aquatic Injury Prevention Advisory Committee express gratitude to Archie Kalepa and OluKai for sponsoring these efforts during Hawai'i Beach Safety Week.

With COVID-related travel restrictions, the number of visitors at local beaches is drastically reduced, but all counties have seen an increase in residents going fishing and participating in other shoreline and beach activities. Counties are highlighting various efforts to keep people safe in and around the ocean.

For Hawai'i Beach Safety week this year the City & County of Honolulu is highlighting Ocean Safety Division's increased mobile presence. Division jet skis, all-terrain vehicles (ATVs), utility terrain vehicles (UTVs) and trucks patrol O'ahu's beaches, coastline, and near shore waters. According to City & County of Honolulu Ocean Safety and Lifeguard Services Division Chief John Titchen, in response to COVID-19 from mid-March through the end of April, Ocean Safety was entirely mobile and on-duty from dawn to dusk. Even with less people out during the early

days of the pandemic, Ocean Safety personnel response stats did not decrease, and outreach via vehicle patrols, communications over mounted public address systems, and increased water safety presence island-wide likely prevented many more injuries around the ocean.

Kaua'i County has been able to keep its beach parks open and accessible during the pandemic, yet Ocean Safety Bureau Operations Chief Kalani Vierra notes locals are increasingly seeking out "hidden gems" in remote locations that may prevent quick access to emergency assistance if they get into trouble. "We will be emphasizing one ocean safety tip a day to compliment the COVID safety messages already out there. Our county is doing well keeping COVID at bay, and we have had fewer drownings because we have way fewer tourists, but we don't want to let our guard down."

Maui is emphasizing the public's critical role in the 911 emergency call system, especially during ocean-related emergencies. According to Maui Ocean Safety Battalion Chief Jeff Giese, "As the first on scene, community members play a critical role in our emergency response system. Early notification and provision of accurate and useful information lay the groundwork for a successful lifesaving rescue. The more we know and the sooner we know it, the better our chances of getting those in trouble back safely to their families."

Hawai'i Island has historically had the highest proportion of resident drownings. Ocean safety and rescue services were involved in assisting several residents who were fishing or diving and went missing during various incidents in the early part of the year. Assistant Fire Chief Darwin Okinaka encourages divers and 'opihi pickers to use a tight buddy system and asks adults to keep a close eye on children, especially around coastal areas. He notes, "Shoreline activities, such as fishing and picking 'opihi, account for more than one-third of fatal ocean drownings among Big Island residents. We stress the importance of being aware of the current ocean conditions and don't take chances if they're unfavorable."

According to the Hawai'i Department of Health, residents comprised eight of nine fatal ocean drownings in Hawai'i since April (compared to only four of the 14 fatal drownings from January through March, the pre-lockdown period in Hawai'i). Fatal ocean drownings in the state are projected to be about 50% lower than the annual average of 82 over the last five years. Free diving continues to be one of the most common activities among resident drowning victims, accounting for nearly half (5) of the 12 fatal incidents between January and July 2020.

The advisory committee is coordinated by the Department of Health and is a coalition of organizations from all four counties, as well as state and non-profit groups working to prevent water-related tragedies. For more information on the Hawai'i Drowning and Aquatic Injury Prevention Advisory Committee or drowning prevention efforts statewide, please contact advisory co-chair Gerald Kosaki at gkosaki@hawaii.rr.com or Hawai'i Department of Health's Bridget Velasco at bridget.velasco@doh.hawaii.gov

#