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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 5, 2021

21-020

Department of Health State Laboratory confirms presence of B.1.1.7 variant

HONOLULU – The Hawai'i Department of Health's State Laboratories Division (SLD) confirms the presence of the B.1.1.7 variant in Hawai'i.

The confirmed specimen is one of four samples previously identified in Hawai'i as having a molecular clue consistent with the B.1.1.7 variant. The other specimens are still being analyzed.

"We have already initiated contact tracing investigations and are monitoring these cases closely," said Acting State Epidemiologist Dr. Sarah Kemble.

The variant strain was detected in an O'ahu resident with no history of travel. This person initially experienced symptoms in late January. One close contact also tested positive for the COVID-19. Whole genomic sequencing is being performed on the specimen from the close contact to determine if B.1.1.7 is present.

The B.1.1.7 variant, originally detected in the United Kingdom, is highly transmissible and leads to a more rapid spread than other common COVID-19 strains.

SLD is performing genome sequencing on 300 specimens per month. "The specimens selected for sequencing represent patients more likely to have variant strains, as well as specimens representing all parts of the state," said State Laboratories Division Director Dr. Edward Desmond. "The sequencing will indicate the presence of variant strains with any of the mutations of concern."

“We are concerned about the presence of the B.1.1.7 variant in Hawai‘i because more contagious strains can lead to an increase in case rates and ultimately require a higher percentage of people to get vaccinated in order to achieve herd immunity,” said Health Director Dr. Elizabeth Char.

“We are not helpless against this highly transmissible variant,” said Hawai‘i Governor David Ige. We can fight it by getting vaccinated and taking everyday actions such as wearing masks, distancing, washing hands and staying home when sick. And please limit your Super Bowl viewing parties to household members. Together, we can stay safe.”

“It is more important now than ever that we that we take preventative measures to protect ourselves, our loved ones, and neighbors from COVID-19,” added Dr. Char.

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