



OFFICE of
Wellness
& Resilience

STATE OF WELL-BEING PROJECT

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A Landscape Assessment of Mental Health and Well-Being Supports and Services, Barriers, Facilitators, and Needs for State, County, and Select Community-Based First Responders, Healthcare, and School Staff



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*State of Well-Being Project: A Landscape Assessment of Mental Health and Well-Being
Supports and Services, Barriers, Facilitators, and Needs for State, County, and Select
Community-Based First Responders, Healthcare, and School Staff*

Executive Summary

Introduction and Legislative Mandate

Workplace mental health has emerged as a critical public health challenge, profoundly affecting workers, employers, and broader society. In Hawai‘i, first responders, healthcare providers, and school staff face extraordinary demands, compounded by the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the devastating 2023 Maui wildfires, ongoing work-related trauma, and persistent challenges including workforce shortages and economic strain.

Established by the Hawai‘i State Legislature in 2023 through Act 106, the State of Well-Being Project represents Hawai‘i's commitment to addressing community and workforce mental health through the Office of Wellness and Resilience (OWR). This initiative assesses and enhances system-wide and targeted mental health and well-being supports and services for public service communities who serve as the backbone of Hawai‘i's emergency response, healthcare, and educational systems. The project focuses on first responders (police, firefighters, and sheriffs), healthcare providers across state, county, and select community health centers, and public school staff including those in public charter schools.

Central to this work is Hawai‘i's definition of trauma-informed care as established by the Trauma-Informed Care Task Force (Department of Health, State of Hawai‘i, 2023): *"an approach to understanding, recognizing, respecting, and responding to the pervasive and widespread impacts of trauma on our ability to connect with ourselves and others, our place and the elements around us, and our ways of being."* This definition grounds our recommendations in culturally responsive, evidence-based and Hawai‘i-informed practices that honor our unique communities.

Purpose and Scope

This landscape assessment represents the completion of Phase 1 of a comprehensive two-phase initiative. It addresses three fundamental questions: (1) What existing mental health and well-being supports are currently available to staff across target sectors? (2) What barriers and facilitators influence utilization of these services? (3) What culturally grounded, community-informed, and data-driven interventions should be developed or enhanced?

The report employs a multi-tiered framework integrating strategies to **Protect** (primary prevention), **Promote** (well-being enhancement), and **Respond** (targeted intervention) across individual, interpersonal, organizational, community, and public policy levels, aligned with current workplace mental health models.

Methods

This report presents findings from a rigorous mixed-methods study utilizing six complementary data collection strategies:

1. **Four systematic literature reviews** totaling 1,256 articles screened and 68 studies included, establishing the empirical foundation for mental health interventions across firefighters, law enforcement, healthcare, and school staff.
2. **The Hawai‘i Quality of Life and Well-Being Survey**, the largest statewide survey of its kind in Hawai‘i's history, with over 8,300 residents participating, including approximately 4,000 state workers.
3. **Key informant interviews** with 81 individuals possessing specialized knowledge across sectors, including organization and community leaders, well-being coordinators, mental health professionals, researchers, human resource experts, and others.

4. **Focus group discussions** with six groups totaling 12 participants to explore lived experiences and collective perspectives.
5. **Comprehensive document review** of over 100 relevant policies, reports, and organizational materials provided by key informants.
6. **A small qualitative survey with healthcare staff**, completed by 15 employees, to assess well-being perceptions and needs specific to healthcare settings.

Key Findings

The Scope of the Challenge

Statewide data from the 2024 Hawai‘i Quality of Life and Well-Being Survey reveal, against the backdrop of Hawai‘i’s broader mental health crises, significant mental health strain across the workforce. Nearly one-third (31%) of residents reported seven or more days of poor mental health in the past month, and almost half (45%) experienced insufficient rest or sleep for at least two weeks. These challenges are even more pronounced among first responders and helping professionals, who reported substantially higher rates of both poor mental health and inadequate rest compared to the general population.

The survey highlights the broader health burden facing frontline workers. First responders reported elevated levels of chronic physical conditions, including musculoskeletal disorders (55%), arthritis (45%), and high blood pressure (43%). One in ten have experienced a work-related injury in the past year.

Economic pressure compounds these challenges. More than half (56%) of Hawai‘i residents expressed worry about meeting monthly expenses, and 63% indicated work is a significant source of stress in their lives. Perhaps most critically, 34% of first responders and healthcare workers, and 35% of those in education and library professions, reported they are somewhat or very likely to make a genuine effort to find a new job within the next year.

Available Mental Health and Well-Being Supports and Services

Through key informant interviews and focus groups, this assessment identified a range of mental health and well-being supports currently available across sectors. These supports are organized into two tiers: Tier 1 (universal prevention strategies available to all employees, aimed at protecting and promoting mental health and well-being) and Tier 2 (targeted response-type interventions for employees experiencing elevated stress or early signs of distress).

Tier 1: Universal Supports and Interventions

Tier 1 interventions represent universal prevention strategies available to all employees regardless of risk level. The most frequently identified supports include **targeted training programs** (such as Trauma 101, crisis intervention skills, and mental health first aid), efforts to foster **positive workplace culture** through psychological safety and staff connectivity, and **Employee Assistance Programs** offering counseling, legal support, and work-life services.

Cultural and values-based supports were also prominent, including **integration of Native Hawaiian cultural values** and connection to ‘āina, **supportive organizational policies**, and **comprehensive wellness programs** addressing mental, physical, and emotional well-being. Organizations reported using **digital mental health platforms** (Trust Circle, Cortico, Lighthouse), **family support programs**, and **union benefits** through EUTF, ERS, etc.

Additional Tier 1 supports include **well-being assessments** through staff surveys and feedback mechanisms; **onboarding and orientation programs** that establish help-seeking norms; **resilience-building initiatives** and **professional development opportunities**; **resource materials and wellness newsletters**; **dedicated organizational wellness budgets**; **nature-based activities** and **community support programming**; **flexible work arrangements**; and **designated wellness rooms and financial wellness resources**.

Tier 2: Targeted Supports and Interventions

Tier 2 interventions are targeted strategies for employees experiencing elevated stress, exposure to potentially traumatic events, or early signs of distress. The most commonly identified supports include **on-site individual counseling** with licensed mental health clinicians, **formal debriefing** following traumatic incidents, and **peer support programs** with trained supporters and structured frameworks.

Additional Tier 2 supports include **systematic debriefing processes** for workplace incidents; **chaplaincy services** providing spiritual support; **enhanced mental health education** workshops; **intensive human resource and organizational support for complex** situations; **cultural healing programs incorporating traditional practices** such as working in the lo'i, connection to kai, and lomilomi; **in-house clinicians** including social workers and psychologists; therapeutic activities such as **animal-assisted therapy**; and **intensive retreat programs** for employees who have experienced traumatic incidents.

Barriers

Financial constraints, including funding cuts, budget limitations, and inadequate compensation, emerged as the most frequently identified barrier (mentioned by 33 participants). **Participation challenges** with voluntary versus mandatory programs (31 participants), **communication failures** including lack of awareness and poor knowledge transfer (28 participants), and **organizational dysfunction** including complex bureaucratic processes and siloed departments (27 participants) also represented major obstacles. Additional barriers included **inadequate organizational support** for wellness initiatives, **concerns about confidentiality, time constraints** that prevent participation in activities, and **funding instability** that undermines program continuity.

Facilitators

Across sectors, stakeholders identified several facilitators that support workforce mental health and well-being. The most frequently cited included **community collaboration** engaging diverse partners in service development (mentioned by 33 participants), **research-informed practice** incorporating evidence-based approaches (28 participants), **supportive leadership** that creates psychologically safe environments (26 participants), and **flexible access options** accommodating different user needs (25 participants).

Recommendations

Based on the synthesis of all data sources, the following recommendations are organized according to the social ecological model, addressing interventions at the policy/systems, community/partnerships, organizational, interpersonal, and individual levels.

Key Implementation Considerations

- **Start with Leadership:** Supportive leadership emerged as the top facilitator (n=26) and supervisor support explains the largest differences in job satisfaction. Prioritizing trauma-informed supervisor training is essential.
- **Address Stigma & Trust:** Stigma (n=24) and confidentiality concerns (n=15) are major barriers, while only about 50% of workers trust management. Building trust through leadership modeling and clear confidentiality protections are critical.
- **Center Hawaiian Culture:** Cultural integration (n=19) emerged as both a facilitator and enhancement priority. Native Hawaiian and Hawai'i-informed values should inform and be integrated into all programming rather than appearing as add-on components. Sector-specific cultures must also be taken into consideration in design and development.
- **Secure Sustainable Funding:** Financial constraints are the top barrier (n=33) and 56% of workers report economic stress. Diversifying funding sources and establishing long-term mechanisms is imperative.

- **Use Multi-Level Strategies:** Literature reviews across all sectors emphasize that single-component interventions are insufficient, since mental health and well-being needs differ from person to person. Coordinated strategies must address individual, interpersonal, organizational, and policy levels simultaneously.
- **Prioritize Evidence-Based Approaches:** Building on proven models (grown here or elsewhere) while adapting to local context strengthens supports and services.

Policy and Systems Level

Ten policy-level recommendations were identified. The top three, based on frequency and strength of endorsement, are:



- **Address financial constraints** impacting mental health and well-being supports through sustainable, diversified, long-term funding mechanisms for workforce mental health and well-being supports and services.
- **Establish reliable funding infrastructure for** mental health and well-being supports and services with multi-year commitments and flexible mechanisms to ensure program continuity.
- **Develop supportive workplace policies** including anti-bullying measures, reformed performance reviews, and clear mental health and well-being protocols.

Community and Partnerships Level

Eight recommendations were identified at this level. The top three are:



- **Build cross-sector partnerships for** mental health and well-being supports and services by engaging communities, state departments, philanthropy, universities, and diverse stakeholders.
- **Implement research-informed practice** by incorporating evidence-based approaches and continuous evaluation into service delivery of mental health and well-being supports and services.
- **Integrate Native Hawaiian cultural values, practices, and perspectives** into all mental health and well-being supports and services, including āina-based practices and holistic approaches that engage the whole family.

Organizational Level

With 32 recommendations identified—the highest number across all levels—the findings point to the critical importance of workplace structures, leadership, culture, and internal systems. The top three are:



- **Address organizational dysfunction** by streamlining procurement, reducing silos, and improving institutional processes, with the goal of improving mental health and well-being.
- **Resolve staffing challenges** through strategic recruitment, retention initiatives, and workload management to prevent burnout.
- **Develop trauma-informed, supportive leadership** through comprehensive supervisor training and leadership modeling.

Interpersonal Level

Eight recommendations were identified. The top three are:



- **Address stigma and shame (particularly around help seeking)** by normalizing mental health conversations through leadership modeling and organizational messaging.
- **Implement peer support programs** that normalize help-seeking and extend the reach of limited clinical staff.
- **Train leaders and supervisors in supportive management** given that supervisor support explains the largest variance in job satisfaction.

Individual Level

Six recommendations address personal knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behaviors. The top three are:



- **Address participation challenges** in mental health and well-being supports and services by designing voluntary, multi-modal programs with diverse engagement options (in-person, virtual, self-paced), remembering that no single approach works for all people.
- **Increase mental health literacy and self-awareness** through psychoeducation on stress, coping, and recognizing personal needs.
- **Include mental health and well-being orientation in onboarding** with psychological preparedness, resources, and foundational training for all new employees.

Next Steps: Phase 2 Implementation

Phase 2 of the State of Well-Being initiative extends through December 2027 and will focus on enhancing existing services and developing new culturally grounded, Hawai'i-informed mental health and well-being programs. Our office intends to turn these findings into action, be mindful of the recommendations within our purview, and partner across sectors to build trauma-informed systems that truly support those who serve. We also plan to develop practical toolkits and resources, which will allow for more granular exploration of recommendations and targeted dissemination of findings.

This assessment establishes an initial foundation for future expansion to include additional communities across the state and groups such as search and rescue teams, emergency medical services, public health workers, and utility workers. We welcome outreach from additional organizations and initiatives for inclusion in future research and resource development. **Organizations may contact the Office of Wellness and Resilience at gov.owr@hawaii.gov.**

Conclusion

The mental health challenges facing Hawai'i's essential workforce represent a crisis that demands immediate and sustained action. This landscape assessment provides the most comprehensive documentation of workforce mental health needs, services, barriers, and opportunities ever conducted in Hawai'i. The findings demonstrate that while significant challenges persist, evidence-based strategies such as trauma-informed organizational practices, peer support programs, stigma reduction efforts, leadership commitment and training, and adequate resources can make a profound difference.

Passionate leaders, innovative agencies, and community organizations are already applying these lessons and individuals across these sectors have ideas to share. By building on their efforts and implementing the recommendations in this report across all levels of the social-ecological model, Hawai'i can create the conditions for workforce and community mental health and well-being that allow our essential workers to thrive while continuing to serve.

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