

United States Senate

September 6, 2020

The Honorable David Y. Ige
Governor, State of Hawaii
Executive Chambers
State Capitol
Honolulu, HI 96813

Dear Governor Ige:

I urge you to request immediate assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to stop the outbreak of the novel coronavirus, COVID-19, that has devastated the residents and staff at the Yukio Okutsu Veterans State Home in Hilo, Hawaii.

As of today, 46 residents and 18 members of staff have tested positive for COVID-19 and at least five residents have lost their lives due to the virus. It is increasingly clear to me that the state home is understaffed and ill equipped to stop this outbreak on its own. Moreover, I am concerned that the state and county have been too slow to respond to the crisis with the urgency that it demands, including with a request for more federal assistance and healthcare personnel. While I understand that the VA Pacific Island Health Care System in Honolulu is working with the state home's operator, Avalon Company, to provide some assistance, the State of Hawaii must act immediately and request that VA step in to reduce the risk to and suffering of the veterans and caregivers at the state home.

Specifically, the state should request that VA deploy infection control expertise to the facility to ensure it is following infection control best practices that will help arrest this outbreak. Under Section 20005 of the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act, P.L. 116-136), Congress authorized VA "to provide to State homes medicines, personal protective equipment, medical supplies, and any other equipment, supplies, and assistance available to the Department of Veterans Affairs." A request to VA for CARES Act assistance will help identify where the facility is falling short, how it can improve droplet precautions, isolation protocols for both residents and staff, use of personal protective equipment, ensure adequate staff capacity, and other measures that will protect the standard of care for veterans and those caregivers working in the state home.

I urge you to request CARES Act assistance from VA to improve infection control at the Yukio Okutsu Veterans State Home and stop the spread of COVID-19 among its veteran residents and staff. Please do not hesitate to contact me if I can be helpful with supporting this or other requests for federal assistance.

Sincerely,



BRIAN SCHATZ
U.S. Senator

Cc: The Honorable Robert Wilkie, secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs