

Senator Mazie Hirono

The State of Healthcare for Maui County Veterans

Submitted by Fred Ruge, Maui County Veterans Council

Having worked with Maui CBOC staff here for years, I know they are doing their best to serve our Maui County Veterans. However, there are still a number of problems which continue to prevent them providing the healthcare support many of our Veterans here need:

The Maui CBOC remains short staffed, and given the excessive work demands placed on all staff, they often experience high burn out and turnover.

When Maui CBOC staff do leave, like two of the three Health Techs, it can take six months to a year to replace them per the VA's HR hiring bureaucracy. This is totally unsatisfactory, and adds greatly to the lack of patient care continuity and staff stress.

There is no pool of available staff backup for Maui CBOC physicians, nursing, mental health or administrative staff when they are ill, on vacation, or otherwise away from their jobs. This results in tremendous additional stress for the remaining, already overworked staff. And these adverse working situations occur more often than not. The solution here is to enable the Maui CBOC to recruit a pool of available professionals to fill these positions when staff are gone.

While it is positive that the Maui CBOC recently added a Social Worker to help our homeless veterans, this social worker lacks the most important means to help our homeless Veterans; and that is VA Housing Vouchers. The Veterans on Oahu get the first dibs on the limited number of housing vouchers available, and the vouchers we do get here have never been enough to help Veterans in need more than a few months each year.

There used to be a staff person at Tripler dedicated to assist Blind or Low Vision Veterans on Maui through the VA's BROS program. However, that individual has not been available to assist our Veterans here for well over a year, and he still has not been replaced. As such, securing blind and low vision services for our Veterans here, as elsewhere on Hawaii's neighbor islands, has been largely nonexistent. Therefore, the VA needs to hire and support a BROS staff person.

Once referred by their Maui CBOC Primary Care Physician to see a medical specialist, such as a Rheumatologist, Endocrinologist, Neurologist, Gastroenterologist, Pain Management Specialist, and others, it then takes far too long before our Veterans here are actually able to see these specialists. This is because these specialists are already overbooked with Veterans on Oahu.

Maui and all the outer islands are at a great disadvantage in accessing our Veterans to the medical specialty care they need at Tripler, Palo Alto or elsewhere. Furthermore, setting up travel arrangements for our Maui Veterans via the VA Travel system is extremely difficult, and often turns out to be very problematic for all concerned.

Veterans discharged from the Maui Memorial Medical Center or other hospital in the afternoon, on weekends or holidays, cannot get their medication prescriptions filled at the Maui CBOC. As such, they either have to pay on their own, or go without if they cannot afford such. This is both very dangerous and very frustrating for the Veterans and Maui staff alike. Therefore, Maui CBOC Pharmacy access here needs to be improved.

The VA Benefits Officer designated to serve Maui County Veterans doesn't even come over to Maui in person to assist our many Veterans with these needs. Instead, he talks with just a few Veterans via Teleconferencing from the Maui Vet Center for just a couple of hours each week. However, this is totally insufficient to meet the many benefits needs of our Vets here.

The VA is a large National organization whose policies, procedures and resource allocations too often fail to take into account that the State of Hawaii is actually many islands separated by water. As such, greater resources and support are necessitated to provide the required level of care here than for Veterans residing in the Mainland states. The cost of living here is also much higher. And it seems that no matter how much Maui CBOC professional front line staff requested the needed additional support, too often VA management remains largely unable to meet those needs.

Any individuals interested in securing a copy of this testimony, please see me afterward.

Respectfully,



Fred Ruge

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Fred Ruge
P.O. Box 3019
Wailuku, Maui, Hi USA
96793

(808) 242-8230

im4veterans@gmail.com

The Maui News

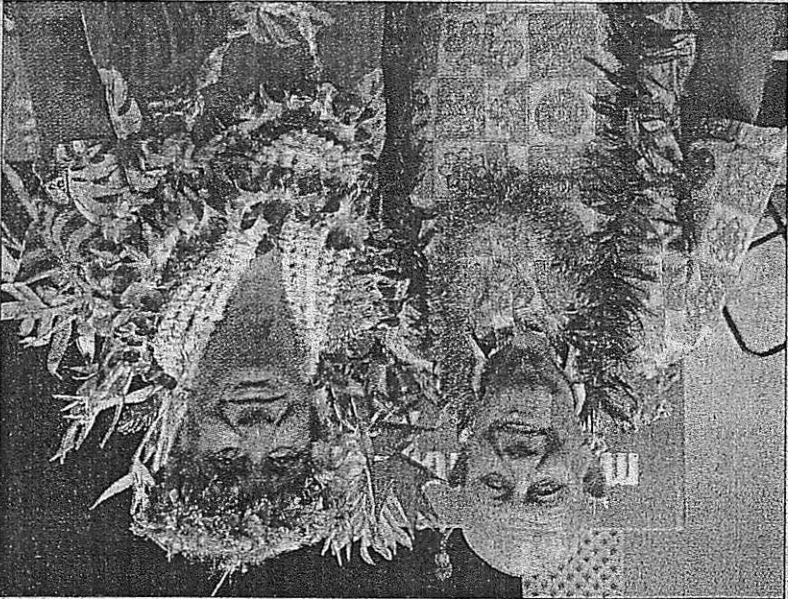
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Two volunteers who donated time generously dubbed 'outstanding'



County of Maui/RYAN PIROS photo

Outstanding Older American winners Fred Ruge and Kanee Wright pose at the awards luncheon May 6 at the Maui Beach Hotel.

Human Services, and Sandy Freeman, executive director of Maui Adult Day Care Centers.

Other nominees for the award were Louise Copuz, Penny Dearborn, Sally theme, "Safe Today, Healthy Tomorrow," highlights injury prevention. Unintentional injuries result in millions of medically treated injuries and more than 30,000 deaths every year.

Each May, the nation celebrates Older

An 84-year-old supporter of veterans on Maui and an 83-year-old volunteer at Hale Mahaolu's elder housing facility, Home Pūnehaha, on Molokai were named this year's winners of the Outstanding Older American Awards.

Fred Ruge and Kanee Wright were honored at the 46th annual awards ceremony May 6 at the Maui Beach Hotel.

Ruge, a Korean War veteran, has been helping veterans through his leadership, fundraising, providing transportation to appointments and guidance through the challenging path to Veterans Affairs benefits. His accomplishments include lobbying to expand the Makawao Veterans Cemetery, helping create jobs for returning Afghanisthan veterans, preventing veterans suicides, extending his helping hand to the homeless, and helping the poor as a Salvation Army holiday bell ringer.

Wright, who brings "a smile with her everywhere she goes," keeps busy by cleaning Home Pūnehaha's windows, screens, tables and chairs. She also runs errands for the kitchen, office and maintenance shop and delivers meals to the island's frail and homebound seniors.

Judges for this year's awards were Audrey Rocha Reed, director of Heritage Hall, Roma Pary, public health nurse; Cesar Gaxiola, executive director of the Cameron Center; Scott Seto, executive director of the Adult and Community Care branch of the Department of

Two who gave big
 Top volunteers receive awards
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