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E KĀKOU

OLA HAWAII
Community Engagement Core Newsletter

Meet your new CEC Support Team from HIPHI

Sairel Labasan joins the Ola HAWAII Community Engagement Core as Program Manager for Community Research at the Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI). Following in the previous Program Manager, Kat Corpuz's footsteps, her role supports the engagement of early-stage investigators and community members to ensure community voices are integrated in biomedical and health research. She has worked with diverse partners including health centers, community-based organizations, and state agencies on various projects around health education, community outreach, data support, and evaluation. She received her Master of Public Health with a specialization in Epidemiology and a Graduate Certificate in Tropical Medicine at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. Her passion for public health is rooted in social justice, health equity, and decolonization. She spends her free time reading, playing with her dogs, finding new places to eat, and imagining new/old systems of care that center community. She is excited to join the Ola HAWAII team and support the important work that JoAnn Tsark and May Rose Dela Cruz have dedicated to for years.

Mikaella-Joy Liban recently joined Ola HAWAII in September as a Community Research Coordinator. She graduated from UH Mānoa with her bachelor's in public health and is projected to finish her MPH Epidemiology program in May 2026. She was an AmeriCorps VISTA for HIPHI, assisting with a qualitative study to determine culturally-tailored tobacco cessation interventions for Filipinos in Hawai'i using artificial intelligence/machine learning (AI/ML) methods. Her current work with Ola HAWAII includes supporting the Community Engagement Core (CEC) initiatives. She is interested in using both qualitative and quantitative data to support Hawaii's communities. Her research interests include data disaggregation, chronic disease, and Filipino health. In her free time, she enjoys reading and crocheting.

Sairel Labasan (left) steps in to manage CEC at HIPHI and Mikaella Liban (right) joins Ola HAWAII CEC to support our data and evaluation efforts.

February CEC Hui Meeting

The Community Engagement Core held our first CEC Hui meeting for Year 4 on February 2, 2026 at the John A Burns School of Medicine Medical Education Building. Other Ola HAWAII core leaders also joined to provide program updates, learn about CEC's recent events and research projects, and meet some of our CEC Hui members and new HIPHI staff.

CEC Hui Members and guests at our meeting

Our Co-Director JoAnn Tsark began with reflections for 2026 by sharing encouraging words by Josiah Akau and reminding all of us of the important work ahead amidst a challenging landscape for our communities.

CEC Hui member Puni Kekauoha presented on Papakōlea's journey towards a more equitable model of community health research. She recounted the early days when outside groups, after completing their research projects with Papakōlea residents, would promptly disappear without sharing findings, next steps, or considering direct impact. This resulted in Papakōlea's decision to protect their community and close Papakōlea from outside researchers for nearly three decades. It wasn't until 2022 that Kula no nā Po'e led their first research project, with a Principal Investigator from their community. Papakōlea has since developed their own model of community-based participatory research that works for Papakōlea and its residents, one that upholds traditional Hawaiian values.

Dr. May Rose Dela Cruz gave an update on Ola HAWAII activities and introduced Dr. Yuanyuan Fu and Dr. Zhanwei Wang, Ola HAWAII funded researchers. They presented findings from their research on colorectal and breast cancer in Native Hawaiians. While the two projects are purely basic science in nature, Dr. Fu and Dr. Wang continue to work on a community engagement plan that includes consideration of plain-language formats and messaging that is clear, respectful, and translates to community impact.

Dr. Jerris Hedges closed out the meeting with updates on renewal of the Ola HAWAII program and grant opportunities. Federal-level changes have been top of mind for many, from University researchers, public health professionals, to our community members. Discussions centered around these changes and on potential strategies to facilitate our work to support early stage investigators conducting translational research.

Aunty Puni Kekauoha presents at the CEC Hui Meeting

Papakōlea's Evening of Research - Report to Community by KULA

Kula no na Po'e Hawai'i o Papakōlea, Kewalo, Kalāwahine (KULA) brought together over 30 community members, including partner organizations, researchers, and Papakōlea residents, for a night of community research supported by Center for Pacific Innovations, Knowledge, and Opportunities (PIKO) and Ola HAWAII.

Founded in 1992, KULA has become a trusted and culturally rooted organization through its community-driven efforts. It serves the Papakōlea, Kewalo, Kalāwahine, and homestead communities across the state. KULA acts as a trusted steward of community care, ensuring that residents and community members directly benefit from the research projects and initiatives in which they participate. Members of KULA's executive team serve on the community advisory committees of both PIKO and Ola HAWAII. This report to the community highlights KULA's research journey in CBPR over the decades through academic and Native Hawaiian-serving organization partnerships, emphasizing the community's ongoing role in restoring trust and shaping research efforts.

Feedback from attendees was overwhelmingly positive, with many expressing gratitude and interest in future involvement. The audience's key takeaways include the importance of community involvement in research, cultural safety, and community-owned data, with increased interest in joining upcoming advanced care planning workshops and other community programs.

The event received positive feedback from the residents of Papakōlea regarding the projects presented.

Featured Research

Researchers and community partners reported the processes, intervention and results of the following CBPR projects at Papakōlea: 1) I Kua Na'u, Advance Care Planning, 2) Hawaiian Homestead Health Survey and 3) 'Auamo Ke Kuleana o na Ma`i Po`ina (Carrying the kuleana for one with memory loss), Caregiver Training for Kupuna living with Alzheimer's Disease and other age-related dementia.

Third Annual Araw ng Saliksik Celebrates Research

The Pinerds, our champions of community-engaged Filipino research, observed Filipino-American History month in a way only true nerdy researchers would: a full day celebration of health research in a community gathering of students, university researchers, nonprofit partners, and community groups.

The Pinerds and the Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI) brought the third *Araw Ng Saliksik* (Research Day) community event to the heart of Kalihi at Pālama Settlement. Over 80 attendees listened in on presentations covering a wide array of topics from student researchers from Farrington and Waipahu High Schools, and students and staff from the University of Hawai'i Thompson School of Social Work and Public Health and the John A. Burns School of Medicine. Activities honoring Filipino heritage and local Filipino culture invited participants to honor and proudly display their Filipino identity.

Like other Report to Community (RTC) events, *Araw Ng Saliksik* brings research back to the community in culturally-relevant, fun, and engaging ways. It translates the language of research to a language that is accessible to communities, an endeavor that is often left out by traditional research. In addition, *Araw Ng Saliksik* holds deeper significance in that it spotlights a group that is often forgotten or hidden in many spaces, including health research. With this RTC, students and community members are exposed not just to the field of research but to research that is done by and for Filipinos. Pinerds founder and CEC co-director, Dr. May Rose Dela Cruz shares, "Conducting research with this community is important, but it's just as important to share the data and stories back to them so they can see the fruits of their contributions and feel empowered to be part of the decisions that impact their health."

This event would not be possible without our community and academic partners and attendees, salamat and agyamankami. We look forward to seeing you all again in October 2026!

Attendees reflected on their favorite memories growing up in the Philippines through an activity at the Report to Community event.

Members of the Pinerds at Araw Ng Saliksik. From left to right: Kami Yamamoto, Dr. Arcelita Imasa, Mikaella Liban, Dr. Jermy Domingo, Dr. Vanessa Cunanan, Dr. Angela Sy, Kathleen Corpuz, Dr. May Rose Dela Cruz, Dr. Melissa Agsalda-Garcia, Dr. Jourdan McMillan, and Dr. Ruthsenne Perron

Research in the Filipino community is thriving with its own Filipino researchers.
—Dr. May Rose Dela Cruz

MALAMA Aquaponics Goes to Hilo

Ke Kula Nui O Waimānalo (KKNOW) has been a long-time partner of Ola HAWAII. Their MALAMA (Mini Ahupua'a for Lifestyle and Mea'ai through Aquaponics) study has successfully served over 200 Native Hawaiian families since its inception in 2009. With support from Ola HAWAII and multiple other sources, the project has grown statewide with new installations on Maui and Hawai'i islands.

Hawaiian families in Hilo learn about the MALAMA Aquaponics project.

Over 56 people attended the RTC at the University of Hawai'i Komohana Research Station in Hilo to learn about the study and opportunities to participate. Attendees learned about how backyard aquaponics function as "mini ahupua'a" that bridge traditional Native Hawaiian land stewardship with modern agricultural technology. Waimānalo and Hilo leaders were invited to share "lessons from the yard," focusing on empowering families to start or sustain their own food sovereignty journeys. And of course, research findings were shared on how backyard systems have increased access to fresh mea'ai (food) and strengthened pilina. And true to form for Ke Kula Nui o Waimanalo, part of the event included *hana nòeu,* a cultural learning activity featuring a master lauhala weaver.

At the end of the RTC, attendees were grateful for the opportunity and expressed further interest in learning about backyard aquaponics with regards to sustainability, efficiency, and supporting food security within their 'ohana and broader communities.

Kat at the UC Gil Tract Farm with the Planting Oceania hui.

Message from Kat (Ola HAWAII's former Program Manager)

In August 2025, I began my first semester in the University of California Berkeley's DrPH program and moved to the Bay Area for the first time. Beyond navigating graduate school, I've been intentional about finding communities rooted in social justice. One of the most meaningful spaces I joined this semester was the Berkeley American Cultures Center Graduate Learning Community. Our cohort of twenty graduate students from departments across campus met biweekly on Thursday for an hour of discussion, reflection, and collective problem-solving.

These workshops featured speakers engaged in community-based participatory research (CBPR) and partnerships with local organizations throughout California. I especially valued hearing from peers and faculty across disciplines with questions such as: How do we build trusting relationships while also representing the institution? How can our research and scholarship benefit communities? These conversations were grounding. They reminded me that many of us are actively reimagining our roles within the university and pushing for scholarships that redistribute power rather than reinforce it. Being part of this learning community reassured me that I'm not alone in wanting to do this work differently.

Dr. Barbara Israel

We honor the legacy of Dr. Barbara Israel, a pioneer in Community-Based Participatory Research who passed away on February 6, 2026. Her lifelong commitment to health access, community-engaged research, and advancing inclusive research practices continues to shape this work and inspire future generations. Some of our colleagues at Ola HAWAII had the opportunity to meet and work with Dr. Israel. So many more have been beneficiaries of her four decades of work and advocacy in community-based participatory research.

Dr. Barbara Israel (photo courtesy of University of Michiaan)

What's coming up with CEC?

Hawai'i Good Food Alliance has completed the first of a series of data trainings that will culminate into a Report to Community. The 'Aha 'Ai Pono Data Analysis Training Series brings together diverse community partners and leaders working in Hawai'i's Food is Medicine movement. The training provides a space for all partners to analyze data from previous convenings on food sovereignty and security and strategize future programming and collaborations. CEC will be supporting their upcoming Report to Community.

HIPHI's Community Health Conference

Early bird registration is now open for the 2026 Community Health Conference hosted by the Hawai'i Public Health Institute. Register before April 17 for discounted registration rates. Special rates are also offered for full-time students and retirees.

Hosted by Hawai'i Public Health Institute, the 2026 Community Health Conference will be one of the largest gatherings of public health stakeholders in the Pacific. We anticipate over 250 attendees, with representatives from community-based organizations, health systems, local and state health agencies, non-profit organizations, academia, businesses, and more.

The conference theme, Navigating Change: Shaping the Future of Public Health, will provide insights into a rapidly evolving public health landscape marked by shifting federal priorities and funding cuts, while exploring pathways to advance the policies, systems, and environments that shape our health. The conference will center around four tracks: Environmental Health; Workforce; Research, Data, and AI; and Policy and Prevention.