DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES WORKS TO PROTECT AND CONTINUE BENEFITS AND SERVICES DURING THE COVID-19 CRISIS

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Department of Human Services Works to Protect and Continue Benefits and Services During the COVID-19 Crisis

Honolulu, HI – The State of Hawaii Department of Human Services (DHS) is taking aggressive actions to protect the health and safety of the individuals and families we serve by maintaining essential services to help the people of Hawaii during this COVID-19 crisis.

Director Pankaj Bhanot, Department leaders, and community stakeholders are working to ensure all DHS essential services will continue to be provided, but in a modified manner. This means limiting face-to-face contact with the public to protect the health and safety of everyone, especially vulnerable individuals, as well as DHS employees and providers.

“Our priority is the health and safety for our recipients, applicants, and staff who are first responders in times of crisis. Many of our services are essential for the well-being and safety of our most vulnerable communities, as well as those who are economically impacted by these events,” Director Bhanot said. He continued, “We have already begun to receive and process new applications for benefits and services in response to COVID-19. Our essential services will continue uninterrupted and our employees shall continue to report to work from the office or remotely from home. During these challenging times, we will continue to serve our State with aloha. Together, we honor our commitment to supporting our collective community; individuals and families from keiki to kupuna.”

The Department of Human Services has taken the following actions to ensure continuity of services to include:

SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN AND OUR KUPUNA

Supplemental Nutritional Assistance Program (SNAP) and Financial Benefits:

The Benefit, Employment, and Support Services Division (BESSD) of DHS will continue to serve residents throughout the pandemic.

Changes have been implemented to protect clients and staff during this time:

• There is a reduction in staff at these administrative offices and processing centers, but they are working hard to manage the workload and provide reduced exposure for all. Please be patient with our staff as they work as quickly as they can to process requests and applications.
• Telephone will be the primary means to contact BESSD processing centers and other offices. Please refer to the DHS website (humanservices.hawaii.gov) for the phone number of the processing center nearest to you.
• If you visit a processing center, signage will instruct you to drop off your forms in the drop box and to contact the office by phone. The phone number will be posted on a sign there for your convenience.
• While the lobbies are officially closed during the pandemic, if you do not have access to a phone, signage will instruct you how to alert BESSD staff at the center that you have no phone. Staff will work with you through the security doors to help in any way possible.
• Hawaii Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards will be mailed to the address provided in the application instead of being picked up in person. Please ensure that the address provided is correct.

First Time Applicants:
If you are applying for the first time, we invite you to use the electronic fillable application on the DHS website (you may have to download Adobe Acrobat). Once complete, you may print, sign, mail, or drop off the application at a processing center nearest to your home as noted above. Or, if you are unable to place your signature on the page, you may scan or take a photo of the application and send it as an attachment to the email address noted on the website: BESSD.StatewideBranch@dhs.hawaii.gov.

Current Recipients of SNAP:
SNAP certification periods for recipients requiring six-month review or eligibility reviews during the months of March, April, and May will be extended an additional six months to ensure no lapse in benefits due to the pandemic. A notice will be sent to you, at the last known address on file via U.S. Postal mail providing more details.

Due to this pandemic, the United States Department of Agriculture has also waived the Able-Bodied Adults Without Dependents Work / Education and Training requirement. This is in response to the decline in available work and closure of training courses due to the pandemic.

More information will be provided on these and several other program enhancements geared to help residents during this difficult time. Please check the DHS website frequently.

Child Care:
Continued operations of DHS regulated child care facilities and homes are allowed under essential functions under all counties that have issued emergency rules or proclamations. Each individual

child care facility or home is assessing whether it will continue to operate and offer services. Some facilities and homes are continuing to provide child care to essential workers during this time of need.

The State Emergency Operations Center (EOC), in consultation with the Hawaii Department of Health (HDOH) are the lead entities to identify if a case or person under investigation (PUI) is associated with a child care facility or home. If it is determined that anyone at a child care facility or home may have been exposed, EOC and HDOH will work closely with the affected child care facility or home to minimize the spread of the illness.

HDOH and the Centers for Disease Control have guidance for schools and universities, which also applies to child care facilities and can be found at:
https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/providervendor-covid-19-information/ .

DHS is continuing to identify ways to provide emergency child care for first responders and will be providing more updated information in the coming days. We are working daily alongside our community partners and stakeholders to ensure continued child care for essential workers in our community.

Child Welfare and Adult Protective Services:
The health and safety of our families and employees are our first priority. Child Welfare Services (CWS) and Adult Protective and Community Services Branch (APCSB) will continue to respond to reports of any instance of abuse, neglect, harm, or exploitation. We have advised our staff to adhere to social distancing when visiting homes (at least 6 feet) when they must travel in the community. For information regarding CWS hearings in Family Courts throughout the State, please visit the Judiciary Website at https://www.courts.state.hi.us/. Due to strict social distancing, family visits between parents and children are being modified and arrangements are being arranged through video conferencing methods and other technological means.

Reporting Lines Remain Staffed:
Child Abuse Reporting 808-832-5300
Child Abuse Reporting from neighbor islands Toll Free: 1-888-380-3088
Child Trafficking Reporting 808-832-1999
Child Trafficking Reporting from neighbor islands Toll Free: 1-888-398-1188
Adult Abuse Reporting 808-832-5115

Health Care Coverage:
Like all other health care services provided, there are no co-pays for services related to COVID-19 for Med-QUEST. We encourage the community to apply online if you are in need of health care insurance. If you do not have access to a computer to apply online, staff are available to help you complete an application over the phone. Please note that due to the current situation, phone wait times are longer than usual. More details with application links and contact phone numbers are available on Med-QUEST's website at https://medquest.hawaii.gov/en/about/recent-news/2020/CoronaVirus.html.

Med-QUEST will postpone implementing new contracts regarding health plans until further notice as we are fully devoted to responding to this public health crisis and making sure Med-QUEST be-

neficiaries receive the care they need. Please continue to contact your current provider under your existing health plan.

SUPPORTING INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

The Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) is continuing to support essential services statewide while implementing social distancing to mitigate community spread of COVID-19. Many DVR staff are working remotely to support continuity of services and can be reached during regular business hours by contacting the office nearest you by phone.

Staff will return your call as soon as possible. If you are unable to reach staff by phone and prefer email contact you may send an email message to: mbates@dhs.hawaii.gov. Should arrangements be needed to meet with staff in person, we will make every effort to accommodate these requests while ensuring everyone's safety.

SUPPORTING HOUSELESS INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES

All DHS funded homeless shelters and outreach programs are also considered essential services. DHS Homeless Programs Office is maintaining close contact with providers and are working with them to provide flexibility with contract requirements and have established weekly office hours for all providers in partnership with the Department of Health and Behavioral Health Services Administration. Homeless services outreach staff continue to make sure basic services are offered to unsheltered individuals.

DHS has also been in contact with domestic violence shelters and is working to ensure these essential services continue.

DHS regular hours of operation shall remain the same (please note that there will be no face-to-face interaction); Monday – Friday, from 7:45 am to 4:30 pm. Closed on weekends, State and Federal Holidays. For more information go to https://humanservices.hawaii.gov.

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