

Ulu Kukui O Kaulike

Advancing Justice for Kānaka Maoli in One Generation Through Health Policy

Kealoha Fox

Valuing Our Ancestors

One hundred fifty years ago, Kahikina Kelekona, my kupuna kāne, wrote about ma‘i pālahalaha (infectious diseases) at the intersection of land dispossession, political shifts, discrimination, and industrialization. A journalist and editor of Hawaiian language newspapers, in *Ka Leo o ka Lahui* he referred to the spreading sickness of Hansen’s disease, or leprosy as it was called then, as Ma‘i Ho‘oka‘awale ‘Ohana, the sickness that separates families. In 2020, with rising rates of COVID-19 and a weakened public health system, the testimonies of our kūpuna ask us what we will do to survive and thrive here with our family for another 150 years.

We can answer this call by applying cultural values, understood through the traditional metaphor of a kukui grove, to revitalize a Native Hawaiian culture of health that supports equity, justice, and self-determination in all health and social policies. The kukui, or candlenut tree, is deeply important culturally, functionally, and spiritually for Kānaka Maoli. Here, I refer to kukui as a healing agent. Ulu Kukui O Kaulike revitalizes an ancestral oil for movement. Like our kūpuna, we have the opportunity to light our collective torches, fueled by the assets and tools they left for us. This kukui grove will grow up to advance justice for Kānaka Maoli.

However, we remain subjected to a deep-rooted public health crisis marked by chronic and social conditions oppressing our well-being. Research and data point to non-clinical pathways for positive change. High quality education, for instance, affects someone’s ability to live in safe and secure housing, which in turn improves life expectancy. During the coronavirus, the social determinants of health (SDOH) have been exposed around the world and here in Hawai‘i. Food, a stable job, and a safe place to live have become the focus for recovery, as we move from inaction into response. But thus far, health policymakers have ignored how our culture, language, and traditional values can increase resilience as we recover. In our community, this is shocking, since it is the Kānaka Maoli who have applied ancestral wisdom to navigate health threats, have drawn positive cultural memory from trauma, and have survived many previous epidemics, despite devastating losses.

Ulu Kukui O Kaulike is a culturally-grounded policy strategy that envisions true vitality through a traditional Hawaiian framework of Maui Ola, which balances physical, emotional, mental, environmental, and spiritual health. As of 2014, Hawai‘i Revised Statutes 226–20 requires that state agencies use this framework to recognize health disparities when developing new plans, policies, or resource distribution, and to commit to the well-being of Native Hawaiians, Pacific Islanders, and Filipinos. Some of these agency departments do not always see their role as contributing positively to a healthy Hawai‘i or to Native Hawaiian needs. But culturally-informed policymaking recognizes that our environment, social infrastructure, and social progress all help to create healthy people, places, and futures. Our goals and next steps should advance the past decade’s actions while harnessing resources for turning points during the next.

Applying Our Values to Act

Like one in four residents in Hawai‘i, members of my ‘ohana rely on Medicaid (QUEST Integration) as a knot, along with SNAP/WIC, TANF, and SSI, in their life-saving safety net. Many families have jobs, but benefits still remain out of reach. Employer-based healthcare costs keep rising each year, even for those of us with stable full-time positions. At this moment, the coronavirus pandemic has collided with complicated health economics in Honolulu and Washington DC, requiring us to restructure the investments needed to address our people’s health.

Medicaid plans provide insurance coverage to low-income people, people with disabilities and special healthcare needs, the homeless, pregnant women, and elderly adults. Constantly under attack from the Trump administration, Medicaid has been an important part of the history of national health reform. But every day, without interacting with the people most affected, political leaders and systems create obstacles to getting and staying healthy. Due to COVID-19 related job losses, since March 2020, the Hawai‘i Department of Human Services’ (DHS) Med-QUEST Division has enrolled tens of thousands of additional beneficiaries. Unfortunately, Medicaid coverage for COFA beneficiaries has not yet been restored, nor has Hawai‘i dental coverage for adults, making access unequal and not comprehensive.

But progress toward advancing justice is possible. In 2019, AlohaCare became the first insurer in Hawai‘i—or anywhere in the US—to make permanent commitments to Native Hawaiian members and our community. Understanding that Native Hawaiian health disparities continue because of SDOH, cultural and historical trauma, and a cultural disconnect between health and medical services, AlohaCare’s new 2020 focus implements HRS § 226–20 by building from a cultural foundation that honors Hawai‘i. Providing more culturally-responsive services by 2025 is a major target.

Now is the time to focus on what care coverage we want, to align health services with our community needs, and to realize unfulfilled promises. As AlohaCare

has already done, some of Hawai'i's most esteemed companies must integrate a Native Hawaiian culture of health into their insurance plans and policies. It is the right thing to do and makes business sense. If we can do these things, thousands of people—many among those most oppressed by outdated systems and most impacted by COVID-19—will make huge gains toward improved health and well-being. What if every hospital, healthcare system, and community health center committed to prioritize our people over profits? Hawai'i can be a leader in creating healthy Pacific futures through bravery, rigor, local innovation, and a commitment to confront the challenges we are facing now.

Waiwai Ola

Imagine the progress we can make connecting our cultural values to SDOH in Hawai'i right now by shifting service delivery workflows toward culturally-responsive prevention programs. That opportunity will come in 2021, when DHS will begin investing \$17 billion in Medicaid programs across all islands through to 2030. Emphasizing a process aligned with Indigenous innovation and the awakening of a Native Hawaiian culture of health, the next decade is ours for creating a world class healthcare industry and public health system that puts our values, community, and cultural expertise at its epicenter. Native Hawaiians can apply our cultural and ancestral resources as an antidote and an intervention into local challenges. Just like the kukui.

Within ten years I yearn to see cultural practitioners valued as part of an essential team-based care process. I want 'ai pono, lā'au lapa'au, ho'oponopono, hula, lomilomi, lua, and wāhine hāpai offered as community services underwritten by permanent funding mechanisms like Medicaid. By 2030, we will have decolonized institutions, and invested in community health hubs where resilience and healing are thriving in every island and district. Through a restitution process, legitimate and expert power can be returned to Kumu, Loea, 'Ōlohe, and Haku. Practitioners are already introducing traditional models into education, health, housing, and criminal justice reform, but to multiply these benefits to the mana lāhui, we need to invest deeply in good policy, solid practice, and long-term programming.

My hope is that 150 years from now, groves of medicinal trees will encircle our descendants as they reflect on how their ancestors (us) rose to meet our generation's greatest challenge. I imagine a spirited kūkākūkā, analyzing our intentions and discussing how we built back better, making systemic change in our favor possible—how we came together and protected the values of Hawai'i. I envision this new era we created as one in which reintegration came full circle, and this social safety net will be protected and strengthened by the practitioners of Maui Ola who will flourish in 2170. Just as I seek out the voice of my kupuna in nūpepa to guide my own kuleana today, I have faith that our mo'opuna will look back on 2020, and recognize healing from disorder, because we translated a culture of health back into legacies of care across Hawai'i.

Ulu Kukui O Kaulike is a vision for a health policy that advances equity for Native Hawaiians, and eliminates health disparities within one generation. The growth of this kukui grove will represent an advance toward racial justice for Kānaka Maoli, as we return to healing in our families and across the lāhui, and back to the lands from which we grow. It's not just about getting back to where we were, but envisioning transformative and enduring change. The seeds have been planted, and the flame of systemic change has been lit, and will not be suffocated. May these kukui light the way ahead for all of us, and the important changes we seek.

Ka ipu kukui pio 'ole. The light of justice that will not be extinguished.

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A vision statement for health policy to advance equity for Native Hawaiians—and eliminate health disparities—within one generation.						
Millennia ago...	2010 - 2014	2014	2015	2015 - 2019	2019	2020 - 2030
						
CULTURAL FOUNDATION	COMMUNITY COHESION	EQUITY RESEARCH AND POLICY ANALYSES	SYSTEMS ADVOCACY	LEGISLATIVE COMPLIANCE AND ENFORCEMENT	INVESTMENT FOR SDOH AND DISPARATE POPULATIONS	POPULATION STRENGTHENING
Improving health from an authentic worldview of Maui Ola and Kānaka Maoli well-being	Population health goals to eliminate health disparities and inequalities among Native Hawaiians	Cross-sectoral research based on community needs shapes appropriate health policy solutions	Harness community cohesion to enact legislation that integrates Native Hawaiian values	Substantive policy change requires ongoing attention for complex health goals to be achieved	Meaningful long-term investment by federal, state, and local government is needed to uplift Native Hawaiians	At the core of social justice for Kānaka Maoli is racial equity and healing

Ulu Kukui o Kaulike: Kealoha Fox. Kukui art: Lisanne Paikai.

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