

November 6, 2025

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MEMO TO: WASSP-1(14) File

F R O M: Shane M. Sinenci, Chair 
Water Authority, Social Services, and Parks Committee

SUBJECT: **TRANSMITTAL OF INFORMATIONAL DOCUMENT RELATING TO
MAUI COUNTY WATER SAFETY AND DROWNING PREVENTION**
(WASSP-1(14))

The attached informational document pertains to Item 1(14) on the Committee's agenda.

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Attachment

The Maui News

Maui's Newspaper Since 1900

The Week of September 25–October 1, 2025

\$3.00



Maui News photo / Gary Kubota

Warning signs are posted along the pathways in Wailea. But apparently, it isn't enough to deter some visitors from entering the ocean without lifeguard service.

Maui tops in state drowning rate

By GARY KUBOTA

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Maui led the state with Kauai a close second in having the highest rate of drownings from 2020 through 2024, according to the Hawaii State Department of Health.

Based on population size, the rate of drownings on Maui was nearly three times as high as Oahu and more than double that of the Big Island.

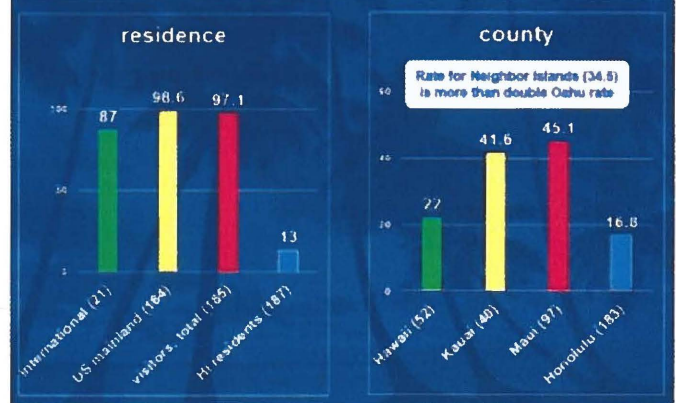
The total number of drownings from 2020 to 2024 totaled 183 on Oahu, 97 on Maui, 42 on the Big Island and 40 on Kauai.

Maui has less than 20% of Oahu's population, but the Valley Isle is physically larger than Oahu, with miles of coastlines including billion-dollar resorts that do not have lifeguards. Signs are frequently posted near shoreline sidewalks warning beach-goers of the potential dangers, but the ocean can still pose hidden dangers, especially for those unfamiliar with Maui waters.

Cary Kayama, a retired Maui County ocean safety operations manager, said the weather can be nice and easy in the mornings in South Maui, but the wind is often stronger in the afternoon hours, occasionally blowing 15 to 25 mph.

"For us, we can see the wind line

Five-year ocean drowning fatality rates (/100,000) in Hawaii, by residence of victim (left), and county (right), 2020-2024



Graph courtesy of Hawaii State Department of Health

Maui tops the state as the island with the highest drowning rate per capita, according to the Hawaii State Department of Health.

coming in. The tourists don't know," he said.

When the wind picks up and currents become stronger, lifeguards will tell visitors to put down their umbrellas and advise swimmers and snorkelers to return to shore.

Maui County water safety lifeguards operate 12 lifeguard towers on Maui with 80 water safety personnel.

When lifeguard services are needed at resorts such as Kaanapali and

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12	septicemia	10	5.3%
13	suffocation	<10	<4%
14	Anemias	<10	<4%
15	Cerebrovascular diseases	<10	<4%
16	falls	<10	<4%
17	fire/burn	<10	<4%
18	mvc-pedestrian	<10	<4%
19	Certain other intestinal infections	<10	<4%
20	mvc-motorcyclist	<10	<4%

Graphic courtesy Hawaii State Department of Health

State officials tracking causes of death among children ages 1 through 15 found drownings were at the top of the list.

Drowning leading cause of death for Hawaii kids

By GARY KUBOTA

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Drowning is the leading cause of death for Hawaii children ages 1 to 15 years old, according to the state Department of Health.

Various causes of death that were tracked from 2020 to 2024 found drownings at the top of the list.

Department officials said congenital anomalies were second, followed by influenza and pneumonia, suicide, malignant neoplasm and heart diseases. According to the department, less than 2% of Hawaii's second-graders have the basic skills to avoid or recover from drowning.

As a result of drowning statistics, the state has developed the 2025 Hawaii Water Safety Plan to help to reduce the numbers. For the

report, go to bit.ly/4p3o7h3.

The Hawaii State Department of Health is also developing the first-ever statewide keiki water safety campaign that includes a partnership with the YM-CA. The first was started in four locations on Oahu.

Department officials said there are a number of steps that can help to prevent children from drowning, including designating an adult focused and free of distractions to maintain constant visual contact with the children being supervised.

Also, swimming pools should have barriers with latched gates.

The American Red Cross also offers a free online class on water safety.

The department advises people to go to beaches with

lifeguards and to pay attention to warning signs and ocean conditions.

A couple of state laws were passed in 2024 to encourage water safety, including a bill designating May 15 as Water Safety Awareness Day.

Kalani Vierra, president of the Hawaiian Lifeguard Association, said the state Legislature also passed a Duke Kahanamoku license plate measure. Funds from the sales of Duke Kahanamoku license plates help to raise money for water safety initiatives, including junior lifeguard programs and learn-to-swim courses for younger people.

Vierra said people can request the Duke Kahanamoku license plate starting in November.



Illustration courtesy of state Department of Health

The latest available graph shows the locations of drownings on Maui for 10 years ending 2023.

DROWNING

Continued from Page A1

Wailea, lifeguards are dispatched from county beaches to assist in the rescue.

On May 23, two men from Kazakhstan drowned about 50 yards offshore between Wailea Point and the Four Seasons Resort. Lifeguards about two miles away at the county Kamaole Beach Park III responded to the call as family and other people watched from the shoreline.

"There were no beach rescue devices on the beaches," recalled Marty Forbes, who witnessed the drownings.

Given that beaches are public, Naomi Cooper, the deputy director of the Maui Hotel & Lodging Association, explained that beach and ocean safety falls within the county's and state's jurisdiction.

However, Cooper said the hotels have had discussions with the county

'We have been working since 2019 to secure permissions and go through the permitting process ... a process that we hope to bear fruit the next year

— County Dept. of Fire and Public Safety spokesperson, Chris Stankis

on how they can partner and support water safety staffing.

"We definitely support any type of partnership that can be arranged," she said.

Cooper said a lot of the tourists who frequent Maui's beaches are not staying at the hotels and

visitors are responsible for their own safety.

County Department of Fire and Public Safety spokesperson Chris Stankis said the department has long supported the expansion of beach protection.

"We have been working since 2019 to secure permissions and go through the permitting process with the various landholders and entities in Kaanapali to place lifeguard towers on that beach, a process that we hope to bear fruit the next year," he said.

Stankis said the bureau worked in partnership with the visitors bureau to create a safety video that has been shown in the baggage collection area of Kahului Airport and shared multiple times on the county's social media platforms.

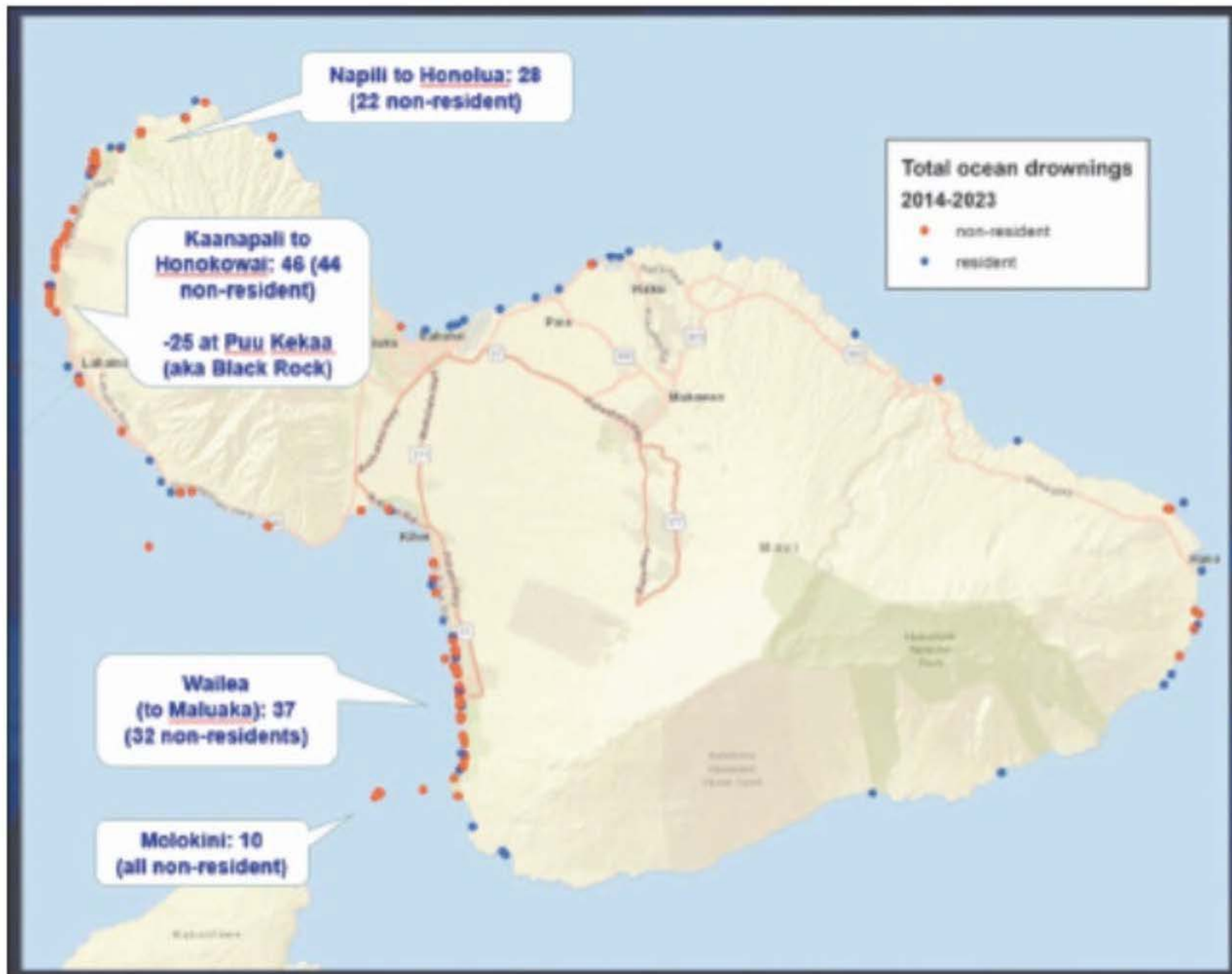


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