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Mayor

William V. Brillhante, Jr.
Managing Director

Merrick Nishimoto
Deputy Managing Director



Kazuo S. K. L. Todd
Fire Chief

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County of Hawai'i
HAWAI'I FIRE DEPARTMENT
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September 14, 2025

TO: Steven Pavao, Chair, Salary Commission

VIA: Glynis Yamada, Secretary, Department of Human Resources

FROM: Kazuo Todd, Fire Chief

SUBJECT: **RESPONSE TO HAWAI'I COUNTY SALARY COMMISSION INQUIRY
DATED 9-4-2025**

Aloha Chair Pavao and Members of the Salary Commission,

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide input on the proposed salary adjustments for Fiscal Year 2025–2026. On behalf of the Hawai'i Fire Department, I submit the following responses to the Commission's seven questions as outlined in your September 4, 2025 memorandum. These responses reflect the scope of our department's duties, our organizational structure, and the challenges we face in maintaining the highest standards of public safety for the County of Hawai'i.

Question 1: What are the primary duties and responsibilities of the department/agency?

The Hawai'i Fire Department (HFD) is the primary emergency response agency for the County of Hawai'i. Our core responsibilities include:

- **Fire Suppression and Emergency Response:** Operating 20 career fire stations and 18 volunteer fire stations to provide 24-hour coverage island-wide. These units respond to structural, wildland, and urban-interface fires, in addition to serving as the backbone for all-hazard emergency response to over 30,000 calls annually for Hawai'i County.
- **Emergency Medical Services (EMS):** Operating 16 advanced life support ambulances and providing pre-hospital emergency care across the island.
- **Rescue Operations:** Conducting land, mountain, and ocean rescues using a range of specialized capabilities, including scuba diving, helicopter long-line extraction, rappelling, swiftwater rescue, and operating rescue boats to support offshore incidents.
- **Hazardous Materials Response:** Mitigating hazardous materials incidents with specialized teams and equipment.

SALARY COMMISSION
COUNTY OF HAWAI'I



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Comm. No. 25-04.01
Date September 24, 2025

- Ocean Safety: Staffing 17 lifeguard towers with 72 lifeguards across 13 major beaches and operating rescue jet skis for nearshore and coastal emergencies.
- Aerial Operations: Maintaining a helicopter program capable of wildfire suppression, search and rescue, and medical transport, as well as drone operations to enhance situational awareness and incident management.
- 911 Dispatch for Fire and EMS: Providing call takers and dispatchers for fire and EMS 911 calls to effectively determine resources needs and dispatch accordingly.
- Disaster Support: Supporting County, State, and Federal partners in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery operations.
- Community Risk Reduction: Delivering fire prevention, public education, and inspection programs to reduce community risk and improve resilience.

The Fire Chief and Deputy Fire Chief provide overall leadership, strategic direction, and operational readiness across these functions, while ensuring compliance with national standards, state law, and county ordinances.

Question 2: How many employees does the department/agency employ?

The Hawai'i Fire Department employs more than 670 personnel across career and volunteer service. Our staffing includes:

- Career Personnel: Approximately 520 full-time employees, including firefighters, paramedics, fire equipment mechanics, dispatchers, and administrative staff.
- Volunteer Firefighters: Approximately 150 volunteers serving at 18 volunteer fire stations throughout rural communities across the island.

This combined workforce ensures the delivery of fire suppression, emergency medical care, rescue services, hazardous materials response, and disaster support across the County of Hawai'i's 4,028 square miles of land and 750 miles of coastline.

Question 3: What is the department/agency organizational structure?

The Hawai'i Fire Department is led by the Fire Chief, supported by the Deputy Fire Chief. Beneath the Deputy, the department is divided into two primary divisions, each overseen by an Assistant Chief:

- Operations Division (Assistant Chief of Operations):
 - Battalion Chiefs of Operations: Six positions, assigned across two battalions (three per battalion), responsible for the day-to-day command of 20 career fire stations.
 - Battalion Chief of Special Operations: Oversees specialized rescue capabilities including scuba, rappelling, helicopter long-line, swiftwater, and confined space operations.
 - Battalion Chief of Ocean Safety: Directs 72 lifeguards assigned to 17 towers across 13 beaches, supported by jet ski-based rescue operations.
 - These positions report directly to the Assistant Chief of Operations, who in turn reports to the Fire Chief.
- Support Services Division (Assistant Chief of Support Services):

- Battalion Chief of Emergency Medical Services (EMS): Oversees 16 advanced life support ambulances staffed by firefighter-paramedics.
- Battalion Chief of Auxiliary Services: Manages fleet, facilities, and logistics.
- Battalion Chief of Communications: Directs fire dispatch operations and communication systems.
- Battalion Chief of Training: Oversees recruit training, continuing education, and professional development.
- Battalion Chief of Fire Prevention: Leads fire inspections, code enforcement, investigations, and community risk reduction programs.
- These positions report directly to the Assistant Chief of Support Services, who in turn reports to the Fire Chief.

This two-division structure ensures that emergency response and operational readiness are supported by strong administrative, logistical, and preventative functions.

Question 4: What does the department/agency operating budget and funding encompass?

The Hawai'i Fire Department's annual operating budget is approximately \$76.5 million, with adjustments throughout the year that typically bring the total to about \$80 million through grants, supplemental funding, and operational changes. The budget encompasses all costs required to sustain emergency response and support services across the County.

Major Allocations (FY25–26, estimated):

- Fire Operations: \$39.8 million for suppression, rescue, hazardous materials, and daily staffing of 20 career fire stations.
- Fire Prevention: \$1.2 million for inspections, code enforcement, investigations, and community risk reduction.
- Auxiliary Services: \$2.7 million for fleet, facilities, logistics, and supply support.
- Communications: \$1.9 million for dispatch and radio systems.
- Vehicle Maintenance: \$1.3 million for apparatus and support vehicle upkeep.
- Training: \$1.2 million for recruit training, continuing education, and certifications.
- Volunteer Fire System: \$400,000 to sustain and equip 18 volunteer fire companies.
- Grants: \$650,000 in grant funding applied toward targeted projects and programs.
- Emergency Medical Services (EMS): \$21.5 million for 16 advanced life support ambulances, equipment, and medical supplies.
- Ocean Safety: \$6.25 million for salaries, equipment, and maintenance of 72 lifeguards, 17 towers, and 13 beaches.

This distribution ensures balanced investment across operations, prevention, training, support services, and specialized programs, enabling the department to deliver comprehensive, all-hazard emergency response across 4,028 square miles of land and 750 miles of coastline.

Question 5: What major challenges does the department/agency face?

The Hawai'i Fire Department faces several persistent and emerging challenges that impact our ability to sustain readiness and service delivery:

- Geographic Scale and Isolation: Covering 4,028 square miles and 750 miles of coastline, Hawai'i County is the largest and most geographically diverse county in the state.

Distance between communities, rural terrain, and limited access points make response times and resource deployment uniquely challenging.

- Wildfire Risk: Increasing frequency and severity of wildfires, particularly in dry leeward regions, create significant demand on suppression resources and interagency coordination.
- Staffing and Retention: Recruiting and retaining qualified personnel is increasingly difficult due to competitive labor markets, high cost of living, and the demanding nature of fire, EMS, and ocean safety work. Vacancy rates in dispatch and paramedic positions have also created overtime burdens.
- Aging Infrastructure and Fleet: Many fire stations, apparatus, ambulances, and lifeguard towers require repair, replacement, or modernization. Deferred maintenance impacts reliability and readiness.
- Overtime Burden: Overtime remains a significant cost driver due to staffing shortages, mandatory coverage requirements, and unpredictable incident activity.
- Disaster Preparedness: Hurricanes, tsunamis, volcanic activity, and earthquakes pose constant risks. Ensuring adequate planning, training, and logistical capacity for “black swan” events remains a top priority.
- Technology and Communications Gaps: Limited radio coverage in certain areas of the island requires alternative solutions, including satellite and cellular augmentation, to maintain operational connectivity.
- Community Expectations: The public increasingly relies on HFD for an expanded scope of services, from emergency medical care to wildland overgrowth concerns, placing additional strain on existing resources.

These challenges highlight the need for sustained investment in personnel, facilities, fleet, and technology to ensure the department can meet current demands while preparing for future risks.

Question 6: Are there any overtime requirements of the department/agency?

Yes. Overtime is an operational necessity for the Hawai'i Fire Department due to the 24/7 nature of fire suppression, EMS, rescue, and ocean safety services. Major factors include:

- Mandatory Coverage: Career personnel work a 56-hour schedule, and minimum staffing levels at 20 career fire stations and 16 ambulances must be maintained at all times. Overtime ensures coverage during vacancies, sick leave, and extended incidents.
- Emergency Medical Services (EMS): Overtime is regularly required to backfill paramedic shortages, particularly given recruitment and retention challenges.
- Dispatch Operations: Chronic vacancies in fire dispatch have historically required significant overtime to sustain 24/7 coverage.
- Specialized Responses: Hazardous materials incidents, wildfires, technical rescues, and large-scale disasters often exceed scheduled staffing and necessitate extended operations.
- Ocean Safety: Lifeguards are occasionally assigned overtime for special events, extended coverage during high surf, or storm conditions requiring tower staffing beyond normal schedules.
- Disaster and Major Incidents: Hurricanes, wildfires, volcanic eruptions, and other disasters create unpredictable demands that can significantly escalate overtime usage.

- Executive and Administrative Demands: It is not unusual for the Fire Chief, Deputy Fire Chief, and other administrative chief officers to work weekends or hours well beyond the standard 40- or 56-hour workweek to sustain departmental operations. Administrative staff, particularly in fiscal and human resources, frequently work additional hours, including weekends, to manage workload and keep pace with reporting, compliance, and personnel demands.

While overtime is an essential tool for maintaining service continuity, it represents a significant budgetary expenditure.

Question 7: What is your recommended salary adjustments and the rationale for these adjustments?

I recommend that salary adjustments for the Directors and Deputies be based on maintaining competitiveness with the broader labor market and ensuring alignment across the County of Hawai'i's general pay structure.

Rationale:

- Attraction and Retention of Talent: Department heads and deputies shoulder the responsibility of managing complex operations, multimillion-dollar budgets, and hundreds of employees. Competitive compensation is essential to attract and retain highly capable leaders, especially given Hawai'i County's unique challenges — including geographic scale, diverse hazards, and high cost of living.
- Leadership Compensation: Executive-level salaries should offer a reasonable increase in pay for an increase in responsibility in comparison to lower-responsibility positions. If positions with fewer duties provide equal or greater pay, qualified individuals may choose to remain in those roles rather than pursue leadership.
- Good Governance: Effective government requires that the most capable people are willing and incentivized to serve in executive leadership. Without competitive compensation, the County risks limiting its leadership pool and compromising the quality of public service delivery.

In summary, salary adjustments should ensure that leadership compensation reflects both the scope of responsibility and the need to attract and retain the best-qualified individuals to guide critical public safety and countywide functions. Conversely, if the County maintains salaries at levels that undervalue these roles, it sends the message that executive leadership is not important and that the governance of the County of Hawai'i is of lesser consequence.

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide these responses. The Hawai'i Fire Department's ability to protect lives, property, and the environment depends on strong, capable leadership supported by competitive and equitable compensation. I trust that the Commission's work will ensure that executive positions within the County remain aligned with market standards and structured to attract and retain the best talent available.

Please accept my appreciation for your careful consideration of these matters. Should additional information or clarification be needed, I remain available at any time to support the Commission's deliberations.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Kazuo Todd'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name 'Kazuo' being more prominent than the last name 'Todd'.

Fire Chief Kazuo Todd
Hawai'i Fire Department