

Dell H. Otsuka, Commissioner, EMC
County of Hawai'i, District 3

October 28, 2024

Environmental Management Commission
Wednesday, October 30, 2024
DEM West Hawai'i Office at Hanama Place
76-5706 Kuakini Highway, Suite 101, Kailua-Kona

Chair Adams and EMC Commissioners,

Agenda Item VII.5 Status of existing staff vacancies and recent hires

Testimony on DEM Staffing Shortages and Workplace Concerns

As a commissioner, I must continue to express my deep concern regarding the persistent staffing shortages within the Department of Environmental Management (DEM). We currently face 86 vacancies, amounting to **30% of our workforce**, a figure that starkly illustrates the urgency of addressing the hiring practices. Despite inquiries, I have not yet received a vacancy breakdown by position, which is critical for assessing our operational capacity and the specific impact across essential service areas.

Important to note, of the existing workforce of **70%**, **how many employees are on administrative leave, sick leave, military leave, vacation and stress related leaves. Also in question would be turnovers.** Some of these “absences” would suggest workplace morale and transparency issues which ultimately affects “our” capacity to attract and retain new hires.

**These shortages not only challenges our ability to meet public service demands but also places additional strain upon our current employees, who must often shoulder extra responsibilities.*

It is also concerning that the **HR staffing within DEM has fluctuated drastically during this past year. This instability directly affects our ability to hire and retain qualified employees, contributing to further operational strain.**

As we have been told, hiring challenges are often attributed to factors such as **low pay scales, insufficiently qualified applicants or no applicants.** I believe that with creativity and community partnerships; **local community college, high schools and the University of Hawai'i** (as has been suggested), we can overcome some of these obstacles. There are apprenticeship

programs as well, “EDvance.”

For DEM to develop internship programs, especially with students in fields relating to environmental management and engineering would not only build a pipeline of qualified candidates, but provide hands-on training, generate interest in meaningful public service careers, while keeping our children home. Other County departments successfully utilize internships, and I urge DEM to explore this option as well.

Not to be overlooked is the fostering of employee growth through training and development, supporting career advancement and mobility, encouraging collaboration and feedback while creating a positive workplace environment.

I respectfully ask that we address these critical staffing and workplace issues with urgency. Establishing a proactive recruitment strategy, exploring internship opportunities, and fostering a positive work environment are essential steps for us to meet our obligations to the community and to our employees, effectively and responsibly.

Sincerely,

Dell H. Otsuka, Commissioner EMC
County of Hawai'i, District 3

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