

Hawaii is the only state requiring and spending millions on COVID-19 testing

By [Allison Schaefer](#) Today Updated 8:00 am



The state is spending about \$38 million to fund one year of its Safe Travels airport screening program and is making plans to spend another \$22 million on top of that even though most U.S. destinations have dropped nearly all of their travel restrictions.

Hawaii is currently the only state still requiring testing for travelers who have been fully vaccinated for COVID-19.

The Safe Travels program, which confirms visitors have had a negative COVID-19 test before arriving, launched Oct. 15. In the beginning it provided a pathway for the state to start opening up tourism, which plummeted more than 90% at the height of the pandemic.

Now with increasing numbers of Americans being vaccinated and COVID-19 cases on the decline, many are questioning why Hawaii still requires a costly and inconvenient COVID-19 test of any trans-Pacific traveler wanting to avoid an otherwise mandatory 10-day quarantine.

Hawaii's lack of urgency in amending Safe Travels to allow vaccinated travelers to bypass quarantines without testing is "illogical and ultimately will hurt recovery," said Keith Vieira, principal of KV & Associates, Hospitality Consulting.

"It's government overkill because it gets votes. Visitors have never been the ones causing spikes; the problem was community-based," Vieira said. "But there's a very vocal minority that will just hang onto the safety issue, and to them this sounds good. They don't care if people are at work or there are enough visitors generating revenues."

In April, 7% of the known COVID-19 cases statewide were travel-related, and many of those were due to returning residents.

Meanwhile, tourism, while on the rise, is still far below its pre-pandemic levels. March arrivals and spending were less than half of what they were in March 2019, a pre-pandemic time when 939,064 visitors came to Hawaii and spent \$1.51 billion.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said last week that most people who are fully vaccinated don't need to be tested for COVID-19.

State Chief Information Officer Douglas Murdock said in an email that the total cost for the first year of the Safe Travels program is about \$38 million.

The state Department of Defense said officials requested another \$22 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds to extend the Safe Travels Airport screening program, but the Legislature did not appropriate the funds for fiscal year 2022.

Jeffrey Hickman, spokesman for the state Department of Defense, said in an email, "Budget and Finance is trying to get us the funds."

State Sen. Donovan Dela Cruz (D, Wahiawa-Whitmore-Mililani Mauka) said Friday that he plans to call a hearing of the Senate Special Committee on COVID-19 to review Safe Travels. Dela Cruz, chairman of the Senate Ways and Means Committee, said lawmakers want assurance that money is being spent wisely and that the program has checkpoints that verify it is reaching objectives.

"Does the science require us to do this? You have to weigh the costs versus the benefits. We can't just be doing things just because," Dela Cruz said. "What scares me is we budgeted or allocated funds for certain things, and we just want to make sure that we actually got them. That doesn't mean that we stick to them — we still have to evolve as the science becomes more available."

Dela Cruz said he would defer to the state Department of Health as long as the department "gives us a rational and scientific reason."

The Honolulu Star-Advertiser asked the state Department of Health to provide insight into the science behind Safe Travels' phased-in approach, and was told that the program wasn't a Health Department program.

Vieira said Safe Travels served its purpose in the beginning, but he doesn't understand the current emphasis, especially given the expense, which surpasses the dollars going to tourism stimulus and marketing.

In contrast, the Hawaii Tourism Authority, the state's lead travel agency, usually has a \$79 million budget, but last year it operated on \$41 million. For next year legislators have proposed a \$60 million budget.

Vieira said Hawaii could get left behind as other areas become easier to get to and more aggressive in promoting travel.

"If there are too many restrictions, visitors don't feel welcome, and that will hurt the booking pace," he said. "You'll end up with new bookings, offset by cancellations."

Lt. Gov. Josh Green told the Star-Advertiser on Thursday that Hawaii's visitor industry could not have opened up without investing in Safe Travels, which he credits with bringing billions of tourism dollars into the state.

"It was not possible to convince the other policymakers that we could open up safely without that investment," Green said. "Otherwise, we would not have opened for many additional months, and there would be vast bankruptcies."

Gov. David Ige has expressed the need for continued caution. Ige has said the problem with allowing in tourists who have been fully vaccinated is that it is difficult to verify who has been fully vaccinated, and even vaccinated people can get and spread the virus.

It wasn't until May 11 that the state began allowing people who were fully vaccinated for COVID-19 in Hawaii to bypass interisland quarantines without taking a COVID-19 test.

Green said more changes are in the pipeline. He and other advisers are recommending that Ige allow vaccine exemptions for domestic trans-Pacific travelers who were fully vaccinated for COVID-19 in Hawaii when 60% of the state is fully vaccinated, which is expected to come June 1.

Green said advisers also have pushed for Hawaii to extend the vaccine exemption to all domestic trans-Pacific travelers when 70% of the state has been fully vaccinated for COVID-19, a benchmark that Hawaii should hit around July 1.

The state still would allow travelers who haven't been vaccinated for COVID-19 to bypass the quarantine through testing.

Despite all the millions that have been spent, Safe Travels still cannot digitally validate that vaccination information is correct even for travelers from Hawaii, let alone outside of the state.

State Sen. Donna Mercado Kim (D, Kalihi Valley-Moanalua-Halawa) compared the current system challenges to the early days of Safe Travels, which were complicated by the logistics of verifying tests and implementing the program across all islands.

"It was really haphazard, in my estimation," she said.

Kim, who introduced a resolution calling for vaccination exemptions, said she is frustrated that it's taking so long to update the system for vaccine exemptions. She also questioned why the system still isn't "user-friendly or easy to understand."

"For the money we are spending on all of this, it's very complicated. I myself have a hard time; I can't imagine the general public out there," she said.

Murdock, the state's chief information officer, said the state is looking at a

couple of vendors, including CommonPass, CLEAR and Verifly, to establish a vaccination exemption.

He said the contractor for the state's Safe Travels digital platform, SpringML, will do the integration of the vaccination data platform. Updating the Safe Travels application to accept vaccinations cards is estimated to cost \$350,000, Murdock added.

"Once the platform that stores Hawaii's vaccination data is integrated into the system, it is expected to take three weeks for testing of the system and updates to be made," he said. "Once Safe Travels is able to verify travelers who have been vaccinated in Hawaii, the process will be changed to include the technology."

The state had said that people could start storing their vaccination cards in the system starting May 7; however, the system still only takes the information on a per-trip basis.

Murdock could not say whether the state would have vaccination verification capability by summer the target date for trans-Pacific exemptions.

"It's too early to tell on the timeline. It depends when other jurisdictions make data available. However, we'll be technologically ready to receive it," he said. "Right now data is being stored state by state."

"It's harder than most people think, because we're dealing with protected health information and there isn't one central database."

Green said he supports offering vaccination exemptions to domestic trans-Pacific travelers — first to those vaccinated in Hawaii, then to domestic travelers outside of Hawaii — even if the state isn't ready to digitally vet the cards.

“My expectation is there is going to always be a fair amount of manual verification because the systems are not as sophisticated as anyone would like,” he said.

Green said the risk of moving forward on a vaccine exemption without digital verification is minuscule.

“Let’s say (theoretically) that 1% of every traveler fakes it — that’s 300 people. Of those 300 people, less than one is going to have COVID-19, based on the prevalence. It’s a negligible impact that should have zero impact on our cases,” he said.

It’s not clear what the costs of delaying vaccination exemptions for trans-Pacific travelers will be to Hawaii’s tourism industry, especially given that travel requirements have eased dramatically across the U.S.

European Union countries agreed Wednesday to ease COVID-19 travel restrictions for those who have had their shots or come from “safe countries.”

Mufi Hannemann, president and CEO of the Hawaii Tourism and Lodging Association, said tourism is recovering but Hawaii’s visitor industry remains fragile.

“We can’t delay the start of vaccination exemptions if we want to get people back to work,” he said.

Hannemann said the start of Safe Travels was delayed three times, and each delay harmed the visitor industry. He warns that Hawaii could price itself out of the market.

“As more locales reopen for business, travelers will be presented with more choice and opportunity as they book their travel,” he said. “We must be

cognizant of this and do whatever we can to continually draw healthy and high-quality visitors to our state."

FEW U.S. TRAVEL REQUIREMENTS FOR DOMESTIC TRAVELERS REMAIN

Puerto Rico was the only U.S. destination besides Hawaii that still required that travelers test out of quarantine, but it removed its testing requirement today.

The list of states that even have travel entry requirements for domestic travelers is growing smaller.

Washington, D.C., requires testing for unvaccinated visitors unless they are traveling from Maryland or Virginia or are there less than 24 hours.

Rhode Island and Kansas require testing, but only for travelers who come from certain hot spots, and fully vaccinated travelers are exempt. Maine has automatically exempted all states from the requirement to test or quarantine, unless a state is otherwise determined by the Maine Center for Disease Control & Prevention as being high-risk.

Illinois doesn't have travel entry requirements, but Chicago has a travel order that requires testing for travelers coming from seven states where the risk of transmission is higher. Fully vaccinated travelers who are not showing signs of COVID are exempt from Chicago's targeted travel requirements.

Note: Details current as of Sunday