

Hawaii looks at business side of growing old

'Aging center of excellence' would tie into APEC's elder-care initiative

HEALTH CARE

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Hawaii's elder-care experts are promoting the Islands as an ideal location for a so-called aging center of excellence.

With Hawaii being home to one of the nation's fastest-growing aging populations, the new initiative seeks to identify ways to help older adults age in place — in their homes and communities — rather than in hospitals, which has been the case for decades.

It's also an attempt to leverage Hawaii's role as host of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation meetings this November. APEC, which recently established its Global Coalition on Aging, has made population aging a priority and has been aggressively pushing private innovation and public policy reforms to meet the economic challenges that come with aging.

To that end, promoting Hawaii as an industry-recognized center of excellence for aging would mean making available more training and education programs for gerontologists and encouraging private business to design more products and services for the aging, said Cullen Hayashida, long-term-care coordinator at Kapiolani Community College's Kupuna Education Center.

"We have to start looking at aging



Hayashida

in terms of well care, not sick care," he told PBN. "It's active, productive and successful aging where aging is an asset, and is the fastest-growing natural resource in the U.S."

Nearly 15 percent of Hawaii's population is currently aged 65 and older, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Nationally, older adults make up 12.9 percent of the population.

That number will continue to climb as the baby boomers age, making them an ideal demographic to market to and build an industry around.

"We're talking to the business sector right now on the importance of looking at this whole issue of aging, not just as an economic drag, but as a way of improving their bottom line," Hayashida said.

Not only is it a priority for APEC, whose member economies, such as Japan, have some of the largest aging populations in the world, technology giants such as Intel and GE have set up similar research and product-development sites in Ireland and Oregon where they're

designing advanced health-monitoring devices and other tools that help older adults age at home.

Basically, there's money to be made in aging.

"With Asia being an important market for Hawaii, there's nothing like learning about what your customers are interested in and try to respond to their needs," said Jay Bloom, a former consultant for the Hawaii Executive Office on Aging and a proponent of the initiative.

"With the APEC meetings, they're operating at the 60,000-foot level and it's up to Hawaii to let them know we're interested and open for investment," Bloom said. "With aging, you can take advantage of that opportunity or kind of miss it then say we'll deal with the pain of it later."

Mae Mendelson, president of Travel & Learn, an intergenerational study tour company, and a visiting professor at Chaminade University, said older adults are assets who can serve as economic boosts.

"What it is saying is that everyone, not just in Hawaii, has a stake in the shifting demographics and what we have not done is gotten in front of it," she said. "We can build an industry around this. People will come here for excellence in areas of healthy aging. It's about being really deliberate about how do we work with this asset we have, which is the aging population."