



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

DAVID Y. IGE
GOVERNOR

ELIZABETH A. CHAR, MD
DIRECTOR

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

February 2, 2021

21-019

State lab detects additional COVID-19 variants

HONOLULU -- The Department of Health's State Laboratories Division (SLD) continues to work in partnership with private sector laboratories to collect and examine specimens of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which causes COVID-19. To date, nine samples of the L452R variant have been identified and four specimens that exhibit a molecular clue associated with the UK B1.1.7 have been found. This indicates the B1.1.7 variant may be present in Hawai'i.

Expedited whole genome sequencing (WGS) is being performed on the specimens containing the molecular clue to determine whether they are the B1.1.7 variant. Sequencing is expected to be completed late this week. The Department of Health will announce results immediately upon completion.

The B1.1.7 variant is highly transmissible. It has not previously been detected in Hawai'i.

Diagnostic Laboratory Services, Inc. (DLS) provided two specimens to SLD with the B1.1.7 molecular clue and SLD found two specimens with this clue among the samples it proactively collects.

Of the nine L452R variants identified so far, one was from Maui, one from Kaua'i, and seven were from O'ahu. Four individuals carrying the L452R variant had a history of travel to or from the U.S. mainland (3 California, 1 Utah), including two returning residents. Investigation is ongoing into one Maui case and four O'ahu cases that had no history of travel.

Overall, 3.4% of 264 specimens that had WGS completed in the month of January were identified as having the L452R variant. Three of the samples that yielded the L452R variant had been collected in late December, indicating the variant has been present in the state for at least 5-6 weeks.

The L452R mutation is considered "under investigation" by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It has not been proven so far to be associated with increased transmissibility of COVID-19, and it is not associated with vaccine failure or decreased effectiveness of the COVID-19 vaccines.

SLD and the DOH's Disease Outbreak Control Division (DOCD) continue to proactively collect specimens from all parts of the State. SLD began performing WGS in June 2020 and now performs WGS on approximately 300 samples per month. More than 900 samples from all of Hawai'i's counties have been analyzed.

DOH is grateful to DLS and all the laboratories that collect and send samples as part of this program.

DOH encourages everyone to continue practicing community mitigation measures. Mask wearing, physical distancing and avoiding large crowds help slow the spread of COVID-19 variants. It is also important to get a COVID-19 vaccine when eligible under the state's vaccination program.

###