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Hawai'i Department of Health laboratory detects Omicron variant in Hawai'i

HONOLULU – The Hawai'i Department of Health's (DOH) State Laboratories Division (SLD) confirms the SARS-CoV-2 variant B.1.1.529, also known as the Omicron variant, has been detected in the islands.

"This isn't reason for panic, but it is reason for concern. It's a reminder the pandemic is ongoing. We need to protect ourselves by getting vaccinated, wearing masks, distancing as best we can and avoiding large crowds," said Health Director Dr. Elizabeth Char, FACEP.

On Monday Diagnostic Laboratory Services, Inc. (DLS) identified a specimen with a molecular clue indicating it may be Omicron. The State Laboratories Division performed expedited whole genome sequencing and today determined the specimen is the Omicron variant.

The COVID-19 positive individual is an O'ahu resident with moderate symptoms who had previously been infected with COVID-19, but was never vaccinated.

This is a case of community spread. The individual has no history of travel.

The Omicron variant has been detected in at least 23 countries and at least two other states.

"Throughout the pandemic, DOH's state lab has been a leader in conducting COVID-19 genomic sequencing, which is how the Omicron variant was identified. Our surveillance system is working. This announcement serves as a reminder to be extremely careful to protect ourselves and our loved ones, especially during the holiday season," said State Epidemiologist Dr. Sarah Kemble.

“Diagnostic Laboratory Services, Inc. (DLS) has worked closely with the Department of Health since the beginning of the pandemic,” said Dr. Chris Whelen, Vice President and Technical Director for Microbiology and Molecular Diagnostics. “When we detected the spike gene drop-out, which is a molecular clue that the virus might be the omicron variant, we immediately reported it to DOH State Laboratories and sent them the sample for sequencing.”

Anyone contacted by a case investigator from DOH is asked to please cooperate in an effort to slow the transmission of COVID-19. Anyone with symptoms is asked to get tested and avoid other people. Unvaccinated people who come in close contact with COVID-19 positive individuals are advised to get tested.

Information on free testing and vaccines is available at <https://hawaiicovid19.com/>.

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