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HAWAII NEWS

Kaiser lowballing mental health counselor salaries, workers say

By [Sophie Cocke](#) • Today • Updated 11:19 pm

The proposed starting pay for many Kaiser mental health therapists in Hawaii is about 20% less than their counterparts in Northern California, according to salary data released by the National Union of Healthcare Workers, whose members in Hawaii are fighting for higher pay and benefits.

The employees have been on strike since Aug. 29, representing what is thought to be the longest strike of mental health care workers in U.S. history, according to NUHW.

Kaiser says it provides competitive compensation, but the salaries and benefits for new hires has been a major sticking point for the union, which says it will continue to make it difficult for Kaiser to attract and retain new mental health clinicians who are needed to alleviate overwhelming caseloads.

“The discrepancy in the salaries is treating Hawaii as second-class citizens,” said Andrea Kumura, a licensed clinical social worker at Kaiser’s Waipio clinic who is helping lead negotiations on behalf of workers. “Obviously, with wages that low, it is making it impossible for Kaiser to recruit and retain therapists, which means in turn that our patients don’t get the care that they are entitled to and that they deserve.”

Kumura said prospective hires from out of state often pass on jobs in Hawaii because of the lower pay and Hawaii’s high cost of living. Hawaii often ranks as the most expensive state to live in and has been hit particularly hard by inflation, according to a recent [CNBC analysis](#).

Kumura said that in addition to higher salaries, the union wants Kaiser to provide pensions for new hires, which current employees have.

“The union term, is ‘Eat your young,’ where basically you sell out the new hires with lower pay and lower benefits, versus the people who are currently working, and we are not willing to that,” said Kumura.

She said Kaiser’s pension is probably the biggest draw in attracting employees from private practice.

A 10-week strike by about 2,000 of Kaiser’s mental health professionals in California, also represented by NUHW, ended in October. Their newly negotiated starting hourly pay is significantly higher than what Kaiser is offering its Hawaii employees, according to the union’s data.

Kumura said the salaries for long-term Kaiser employees in Hawaii are also significantly lower than in California. She’s been with Kaiser for 16 years and said her colleagues in California are paid about 28% more a year.

Kaiser, in a statement, said that it provides market-competitive wages and benefits to attract top employees.

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“The proposal currently on the negotiation table is a good and fair offer based on competitive analysis of industry standards within the Hawaii Market,” Kaiser said. “We are committed to continuing bargaining in good faith to reach a mutually beneficial contract and we ask NUHW to join us to resolve our differences.”

There are approximately 60 Hawaii employees represented by NUHW. The union says the next bargaining session is scheduled for Thursday. If negotiations fail, the next session is scheduled for by Dec. 1.

COMPARING WAGES

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Licensed clinical social worker

21% higher

Northern California: \$54.46

Hawaii: \$45.07

Psychologist

8% higher

Northern California: \$66.92

Hawaii: \$61.81

Licensed mental health professional

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Northern California: \$54.46

Hawaii: \$39.93

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