Resilience Hubs as Essential Partners in Hawaiʻi's Disaster Management System

Executive Summary

Hawaiʻi's emergency management benefits from the interplay of three distinct yet complementary models: **Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT)**, which prepare residents with FEMA-standard disaster response skills; **Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD)**, which aligns nonprofits, faith-based, and community organizations to deliver coordinated resources at scale; and **Vibrant Hawaiʻi Resilience Hubs**, hyper-local sites that embed preparedness and mutual aid into daily community life.

Together, these systems form a layered approach that closes the last-mile gap in emergency management. CERT builds technical capacity, VOAD mobilizes organizational resources, and Hubs ensure both are grounded in cultural context and trusted neighborhood networks. Their combined impact transforms residents from passive recipients into active partners, making disaster response not only effective but also equitable and community-driven.

To sustain this model, the **Vibrant Hawaiʻi Resilience Training Center (RTC)** provides certifications, workshops, and exercises that strengthen all phases of emergency management. Its flagship process—the Community Emergency Action Plan (CEAP)—produces neighborhood-specific operational plans that are both scientifically rigorous and culturally rooted. From First Aid to chainsaw safety, psychological first aid to food preservation, VHRTC equips communities with the skills, systems, and confidence to act when outside aid is delayed.

Through this integrated framework, Hawaiʻi is building more than emergency readiness: it is cultivating a culture of resilience where neighborhoods are connected, lifelines are protected, and communities are respected partners in shaping their own future.

The Origins of Vibrant Hawaiʻi Resilience Hubs

The Vibrant Hawaiʻi Resilience Hub Network was launched to address urgent community needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. With nearly $2 million in CARES Act funding a network of 21 Hawaiʻi Island Hubs offering laptops, Wi-Fi, distance learning augmented with training in 3D printing, and physical and mental health programming, alongside an additional 14 sites focused on food distribution.

In just four months, Hubs supported 41,733 households and 108,214 individuals, 38 percent of them under age 18. More than $544,000 was invested in 30 local restaurants that prepared meals, while $335,000 compensated over 100 community members, all paid at a living wage. This approach simultaneously met urgent family needs and strengthened Hawaiʻi Island's local economy. Beyond the numbers, Hubs strengthened social connection, safe spaces for keiki, and opportunities for neighbors to step into leadership. As one participant described, the effort was "not neat and pretty but amazing, brave, and beautiful."

Beyond the numbers, Hubs created safe spaces where keiki could learn, parents could work, and neighbors could access resources with dignity. Community leaders described being most proud of how quickly people stepped into leadership, collaborated across organizations, and centered Hawaiian values of place and shared responsibility.

This history is more than a record of emergency relief. It established the DNA of today's Resilience Hub network: hyper-local, community-led, and rooted in cultural values. The early Hubs showed how resources can be leveraged to strengthen lifelines and reduce systemic inequities.

Comparing CERT, VOAD, and Resilience Hubs: Structure, Purpose, and Approach

Community Emergency Response Teams (CERT) are FEMA-backed and county-managed programs that prepare community volunteers to respond safely and effectively in the first critical hours of a disaster. Using a nationally standardized curriculum, CERT trains residents in skills such as fire safety, light search and rescue, disaster medical operations, and team organization. These volunteers act as a trained corps that can stabilize emergencies, protect life safety, and preserve essential functions until professional responders arrive.

Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster (VOAD) operates as a coalition of nonprofit, faith-based, and community organizations that coordinate to maximize resources and avoid duplication. VOAD brings together organizations with defined roles across food, shelter, medical care, spiritual care, and case management to ensure survivors receive holistic support. Structured at the state, regional, and national levels, VOAD emphasizes cooperation, communication, coordination, and collaboration.

Vibrant Hawaiʻi Resilience Hubs are community-led, hyper-local sites of preparedness, response, and recovery. Unlike CERT or VOAD, Hubs are embedded in daily community life. They build resilience not only by preparing for hurricanes, tsunamis, or wildfires, but also by activating during everyday disruptions such as illness, the death of a loved one, or sudden loss of income. While these events may not trigger formal government response, they create opportunities for neighbors to support neighbors through systems of mutual aid—sharing food, offering transportation, or helping clear a fallen tree. In doing so, Hubs strengthen social ties while also practicing coordination, communication, and debris removal skills that become invaluable in larger disasters.

Hubs are flexible, equity-focused, and shaped by the priorities of their neighborhoods, even as they are connected across the island. They serve as trusted messengers for emergency information, ensuring that warnings reach residents who may lack cell service, internet access, or English proficiency. Operating year-round, Hubs anchor a culture of preparedness through ongoing education, communication systems, and skill-building—making resilience a **community-wide effort** where neighbors support neighbors.

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In times of disaster, Hubs help close the last-mile gap by coordinating volunteers, sustaining community lifelines, organizing donations, and ensuring equitable distribution of resources. Their cultural grounding sets them apart: while external organizations may bring resources and goodwill, they often lack the local context needed to prevent miscommunication or secondary trauma. By contrast, Hubs ensure that response and recovery are both technically sound and culturally competent. In doing so, they strengthen social capital and create conditions where communities are not just recipients of aid but capable, respected partners in resilience.

Resilience Hubs + ESF Crosswalk

ESF	How Resilience Hubs Support
ESF-1 Transportation	Chainsaw-certified crews clear debris; Hubs identify one-road-in/out vulnerabilities; organize community transport for evacuations.
ESF-2 Communications	Extend official alerts through trusted messengers; maintain redundant systems (Telegram, radio, bulletin boards, door-knockers); counter misinformation.
ESF-6 Mass Care, Emergency Assistance, Housing, Human Services	Support shelters run by VOAD/government partners; manage spontaneous volunteers; organize culturally appropriate donations management and neighborhood-level resource distribution.
ESF-8 Public Health and Medical Services	Provide First Aid/CPR/AED; implement Psychological First Aid and Mālamalama; track households with medical device reliance.
ESF-11 Agriculture and Natural Resources	Build neighborhood food stores through Freeze Dry Hui; coordinate gleaning and local food distribution during disruptions.
ESF-15 External Affairs	Provide credible, community-based pathways for official updates; ensure communication is multilingual and culturally relevant; sustain preparedness culture year-round.

How CERT, VOAD, and Hubs Can Work in Concert

While CERT, VOAD, and Resilience Hubs each have distinct missions, their real strength emerges when they operate together. CERT builds local response capacity, VOAD aligns organizational resources at scale, and Hubs embed both within trusted, culturally grounded community systems. In concert, they create a layered system that reflects a **shared responsibility model**—connecting emergency management directly to neighborhoods, multiplying limited government capacity, and ensuring every community can both access and contribute to disaster readiness. By combining technical skill, coordinated resources, and community trust, Hawaiʻi's resilience system becomes not only effective in the first critical hours of disaster, but also sustainable, equitable, and culturally competent for the long term.

Vibrant Hawaiʻi Resilience Training Center (VHRTC)

Hawaiʻi's geographic isolation and vulnerability to hurricanes, wildfires, tsunamis, and volcanic activity mean that in a major disaster, outside assistance may be delayed for days or even weeks. Even with the best planning, government agencies and NGOs have limited resources and cannot

reach every neighborhood immediately. This reality underscores the necessity for communities themselves to be trained, organized, and ready to act as part of the Whole Community Approach. The Vibrant Hawaiʻi Resilience Training Center (VHRTC) responds to this need by offering certifications, workshops, and exercises that strengthen all four phases of emergency management—mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery. By investing in local capacity, VHRTC ensures that residents are not passive recipients of aid, but active partners in maintaining community lifelines.

Community Emergency Action Plans (CEAPs)

The Community Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) is a structured, community-driven process facilitated by the Vibrant Hawaiʻi Resilience Training Center. CEAPs produce neighborhood-level operational plans that are both culturally grounded and scientifically rigorous, making them a cornerstone of the Whole Community Approach.

- **Grounding in Place & Belonging:** CEAPs begin with No ʻAneʻi—"We belong here"—where residents document historic names, ecological knowledge, and community stories. This grounding builds belonging and responsibility, ensuring plans reflect both identity and operational needs.
- **Life Safety & Immediate Access:** Communities identify vulnerabilities such as lack of cell service, medical dependencies, or single-road access. Mapping these risks provides critical intelligence to reduce loss of life in the earliest stages of disaster.
- **Infrastructure & Community Lifelines:** Teams assess how hazards may impact roads, bridges, utilities, and food systems, and identify local assets—like chainsaw crews, farmers, or radio operators—that can restore services when outside help is delayed.
- **Social Resilience & Mutual Aid:** CEAPs strengthen relationships by planning for everyday needs—volunteers, animal care, food, childcare, and emotional support—so neighbors can activate quickly in both daily disruptions and major disasters.
- **Coordination & Shared Responsibility:** Hub teams define clear roles in communication, facilities, volunteers, resources, and agency coordination, transforming Hubs into catalysts that embed shared responsibility across neighborhoods.

The Value of CEAPs for Emergency Management

The result is a plan that is specific, operational, and actionable—not a generic template. CEAPs identify exactly which households will be isolated, where traffic will bottleneck, which cultural sites require protection, and how to manage spontaneous volunteers safely. For emergency managers, CEAPs provide community-generated intelligence that would otherwise take months of staff time to compile and is rarely available at the neighborhood scale. By extending communication, organizing local assets, and strengthening community lifelines, CEAPs transform residents into capable partners who multiply the effectiveness of formal response systems. In short, CEAPs embed resilience into daily community life, ensuring that when disaster strikes, Hawaiʻi's neighborhoods are ready, connected, and part of a **networked resilience system** aligned with official emergency management.

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Life Safety & Immediate Response

The RTC prioritizes training that directly saves lives in the critical gap before professional responders arrive. Through First Aid/CPR/AED Certification, residents are trained to stabilize injuries and sustain life, directly reducing preventable fatalities and building confidence in local response. In parallel, Psychological First Aid equips residents to provide immediate emotional stabilization during crises. Participants learn to recognize distress, apply grounding techniques, and connect people to further care—ensuring that psychological needs are addressed alongside physical ones and reducing the risk of long-term mental health impacts.

Infrastructure & Access

Maintaining access routes and sustaining food systems are essential to response and recovery. The RTC's Chainsaw Safety Training, offered in partnership with Arbor Global, certifies residents in nationally recognized safe practices. Trained community members can clear debris quickly, restoring transportation lifelines for emergency vehicles, supply delivery, and evacuations. At the same time, the Freeze Dry Hui strengthens food security by teaching residents to preserve local harvests for long-term storage. This reduces dependence on fragile supply chains, enhances neighborhood preparedness, and ensures communities have access to nutritious, locally grown food even during extended disruptions.

Psychosocial & Community Resilience

This training builds the capacity for neighbors to support one another in both everyday disruptions and large-scale disasters. VH's Mālamalama Training cultivates emotional resilience by teaching active listening, empathy, and stress regulation. Participants learn to de-escalate conflict, support mental health, and sustain social cohesion under pressure.

Leadership & Coordination

Preparedness culture requires strong systems for coordination and shared responsibility. Each year, VH convenes leaders at the Hub Summit to refine CEAPs, practice volunteer coordination, test communications protocols, and build interoperability with county emergency management. These trainings reinforce alignment with official systems while protecting the flexibility of community-led response. VH also provides ongoing technical support through Telegram communications channels and monthly Hub Roundtables, where leaders refine Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) and practice real-time coordination. Together, these efforts strengthen the ability of Hubs to serve as communication conduits during emergencies. Finally, the Youth Resilience Academies ensure the next generation is prepared to lead. These summer programs engage young people in hands-on emergency preparedness, leadership development, and technical training, embedding resilience in the future workforce and cultivating long-term sustainability.

Large-Scale Community Exercise

Training is reinforced through live exercises that test systems at scale. Each summer, the Kaukau 4 Keiki Annual Drill distributes thousands of meal kits to families across Hawai‘i Island. While ensuring food access, the deeper value of the program is its function as a full-scale logistics and volunteer management exercise. Over 30 distribution sites across Hawai‘i Island and 600+ volunteer partners stress-test communication channels, supply chain management, and donations coordination—identifying gaps and improving systems each year. This drill not only enhances preparedness but also builds community confidence in the ability to mobilize quickly during a crisis.

Frequently Asked Questions

How do Resilience Hubs fit into the existing emergency management system without creating duplication?
Resilience Hubs complement CERT and VOAD by filling the hyper-local gap. CERT provides technical skills, VOAD aligns organizational resources, and Hubs ensure both are embedded in trusted neighborhood networks. Rather than duplicating services, Hubs extend **community lifelines**, act as **trusted messengers**, and strengthen the **Whole Community Approach** by bringing national and county-level systems into daily community practice.

Do Hubs operate outside of official emergency management authority?
No. Hubs are not replacements for emergency management—they are **extensions of its reach**. Each Hub develops a Community Emergency Action Plan (CEAP) that directly aligns with Emergency Support Functions (ESFs) and incident command structures. This ensures that community-led activities reinforce, rather than conflict with, county and state operations.

How do you ensure Hubs are competent and safe?
All Hubs receive training through the **Vibrant Hawai‘i Resilience Training Center (VHRTC)**, which provides nationally recognized certifications in First Aid/CPR/AED, Chainsaw Safety, Psychological First Aid, and other critical areas. This structured training, combined with annual Hub Summits and monthly Roundtables, ensures Hubs are not ad hoc groups but **trained, reliable partners** capable of safe, effective action.

What role does cultural practice play in Hub operations?
Hubs bring **cultural insight and competency** that national organizations often lack. This prevents **secondary trauma, miscommunication, and conflict** across agencies by ensuring that response efforts are both technically sound and culturally appropriate. Cultural grounding makes Hubs trusted by residents, which increases compliance with directives and reduces misinformation during crises.

How will coordination with emergency managers work in real time?
Hubs maintain clear **standard operating procedures (SOPs)** for communication and escalation.

Redundant systems—including Telegram, radio, and neighborhood messengers—ensure alerts and updates reach residents even in service dead zones. Each Hub has designated leadership for coordination, providing emergency managers with reliable points of contact during response operations.

How are Hubs funded and sustained?
Hubs are not temporary projects. They are embedded in neighborhoods through year-round activities such as community education, food preservation, and social service navigation. This daily role, combined with diverse funding streams and community ownership, sustains Hubs as **durable infrastructure for resilience** rather than one-off initiatives.

What evidence shows Hubs are effective?
Hubs have already demonstrated value through programs like **Kaukau 4 Keiki**, which doubles as a large-scale logistics drill distributing thousands of meal kits each summer, and through the development of CEAPs that provide neighborhood-specific intelligence unavailable elsewhere. These real-world activations show that Hubs are not theoretical—they are proven systems that reduce bottlenecks, extend communication, and mobilize communities effectively.

Contact and Attribution

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For more information, to request training or a presentation, or to join the Vibrant Hawaiʻi Resilience Hub network, please contact us:

Email: contact@vibranthawaii.org | **Web:** www.vibranthawaii.org

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