State and Territorial Issue Brief:
Specialized COVID-19 Needs of the United States Affiliated Pacific Islands

Background
ASTHO urges that special consideration be given to meet the unique COVID-19 testing, PPE, and vaccine distribution needs of the United States’ Affiliated Pacific Islands (USAPI). The USAPI are comprised of three territories (American Samoa, Commonwealth of the Northern Marianna Islands, and Guam), and three freely associated states (Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands). These jurisdictions experience lower standards of living than the U.S. mainland, have limited public health and healthcare infrastructure, are located at vast distances from the mainland, and in many areas are comprised of populations dispersed across remote island archipelagos.

Among U.S. jurisdictions, the islands have the highest chronic disease and obesity rates and suffer frequent severe weather events and infectious disease outbreaks, such as Chikungunya and Dengue. Given their status, USAPI residents may travel without visa restrictions between islands and to states, and frequently do so for work, education, and healthcare given limited options on-island.

Issues and Considerations
- Relatively small populations dispersed on remote island archipelagos pose logistical challenges for developing laboratory testing capabilities, PPE procurement and distribution, and vaccine distribution.
- Healthcare and public health workforce shortages, along with limited infrastructure for vaccine transportation, storage, and administration, create significant challenges for the COVID-19 response. No chain drugstores are able to provide vaccine services in the USAPI.
- There is no central plan for vaccine distribution in the region, with DoD and civilian authorities planning separately despite facing similar challenges.
- Limited information technology capabilities create tracking and reporting challenges.
- There are cultural and linguistic differences between each USAPI and no single COVID-19 response is applicable in every jurisdiction.

Solutions and Ideas for Improvement
- Regional collaboration among agencies and jurisdictions creates the opportunity for greater efficiencies and must continue to be pursued. This is especially critical for HHS and DoD.
- Efforts to build a regional laboratory hub in Guam have begun, but should be accelerated by additional investment and leadership attention so COVID-19 testing can be quickly expanded.
- CDC and the Pacific Islands Health Officers Association should continue to coordinate bulk procurement of PPE and testing supplies, and coordinate weekly with jurisdictions, partners, and governmental agencies on repatriation of citizens and pre-travel quarantine facilities in Honolulu.
- Efforts are underway to coordinate vaccine planning and distribution on a regional basis, but additional support is needed. For example, one vaccine candidate could be prioritized for Guam
and the Northern Marianna Islands, as they have active cases and ultra-cold capacity. A different candidate could then be distributed throughout all islands with FEMA, DoD, and CDC providing federal or military aircrafts, equipment, and expertise.

Further Resources

- [Letter to House and Senate Committees on Armed Services Leadership in Support of Sec. 2852 of H.R. 6395](#)
- [Congressional letter to CDC on Vaccine Planning and Distribution](#)
- [PIHOA Communique on Vaccine Planning and Distribution](#)

Map of the USAPI

![Map of the USAPI](https://www.usgs.gov/ecosystems/climate-adaptation-science-centers/drought-us-affiliated-pacific-islands)


Contact
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