

Occupational Therapists' Role in Natural Disasters: Integrating Disaster Preparedness into Hybrid Programs

Author: Sarah Greenwalt, OTD/S; Faculty Mentor: Tracey Recigno, PhD, OTD, OTR/L
Hawai'i Pacific University, Doctor of Occupational Therapy Program, Honolulu, Hawai'i

Introduction

- 190 million people are impacted by disasters annually.¹
- The global climate continues to change as the annual prevalence of fires is roughly 930,000 worldwide.² As the climate changes, other disasters have become more serious and prevalent.
- Hawai'i's most prevalent disasters include tsunamis, wildfires, and flooding, which are all ranked as relative to very high risk.³
- The transient nature of hybrid programs makes them more in need of further preparedness education for incoming students and faculty.
 - Students at Hawai'i Pacific University (HPU) are from across the nation, and some may not have exposure to the same natural disasters.
 - More can be done to prepare students for the occupation of emergency management.

Project Description

The project involved the development of three different deliverables for the Hawai'i Pacific University Doctor of Occupational Therapy Program's procedures and curriculum to enhance student and faculty disaster preparedness.

This project aligns with Hawai'i Pacific University's OTD program core values. The project demonstrates a professional commitment to lifelong learning and the responsibility of implementing best practices in natural disaster care and occupational therapy (OT) programs (**Kuleana**). It embodies a mutual spirit of care for all populations that may be impacted by a natural disaster (**Aloha**). Through natural disaster preparedness program deliverables, the project encourages OT students to practice competently and to continually enhance their skills with Disaster Preparedness Emergency Management (DPEM) (**Pono**). The project helps OT students prepare for natural disasters and educates them on the spirit of generosity and care through OTs' role in natural disasters (**Kokua**). Lastly, it promotes collaboration in advocacy for OT care in natural disasters for a greater cause (**Laulima**).

Purpose/Aims

Aims:

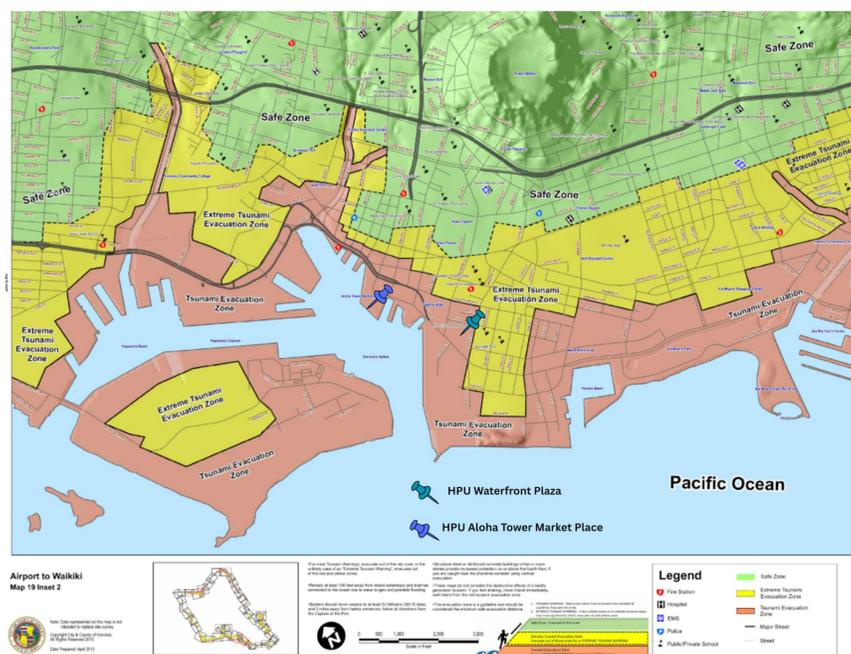
- Enhance the existing HPU OTD program DPEM policies and procedures, specifically disaster preparedness, to better prepare students to apply their OT lens to natural disasters and DPEM.
 - Creation of emergency checklists and further information on Hawai'i's most prevalent disasters.
- Advocate for the professional roles occupational therapists can have in natural disasters.

Figure 1: Maui Wildfire, Contractor News



Note: Contractor News, <https://www.rawpixel.com/image/8752745/photo-image-smoke-fire-public-domain>

Figure 2: Downtown Honolulu Tsunami Evacuation Zone Map Added to Enhanced HPU OTD DPEM Policies and Procedures



Note: Adapted from PDC, <https://static.pdc.org/tsunami/index.html>

Methods

- Information was gathered through a literature review, mentorships with Project Protect and faculty mentor Tracey Recigno, OTR/L, and trainings from Red Cross, World Federation of Occupational Therapists, and Project Protect.
 - These experiences and training were used to collate enhanced program procedure and orientation deliverables for incoming students.
 - Personal advocacy effort with HPU staff, faculty, and administration.
- Data was collected on the effectiveness of the material through a small sample of staff, faculty, and students to improve the quality of deliverables.

Results/Outcomes

- Enhancements to the DPEM policies included: preparedness checklists, updated information on Hawai'i's most prevalent disasters, and an orientation presentation.
- Two faculty members, two staff members, and seven students provided feedback on the enhanced policies.
- Feedback themes from participants included that the information was helpful and would be a good addition to the orientation materials and program procedures.
 - "Very detailed with useful information for future HPU OTD students on necessary steps to take during unpredictable natural disasters." (2nd year OTD student)
- The three deliverables will be integrated into the HPU Doctor of Occupational Therapy Program 2026 orientation.
 - Plans of offering the disaster preparedness checklist and enhanced policies for DPEM to the other HPU Honolulu hybrid healthcare programs (Doctor of Physical Therapy and Physician Assistant programs).

Discussion

- This capstone led to the enhancement of HPU OTD DPEM program policies and procedures which will be immediately provided to the OTD Class of 2027.
- Better preparation of OT students for natural disasters may improve students understanding of working with populations displaced by natural disasters.
- Future directions include how expanding the guidelines specific to different natural disasters and/or populations (i.e., geriatric patients, families of children with special needs) will support HPU OT students to serve the greater good nationally and globally.

References

