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**For more information, contact:**

Jonas Macapinlac  
Chief Marketing & Communications Officer  
University of Guam  
Tel: (671) 735-2944  
Cell: (671) 787-1010  
Email: [jmac@triton.uog.edu](mailto:jmac@triton.uog.edu)

**Nearly \$1M to boost COVID-19 testing for Pacific Islanders**

A newly awarded federal grant of nearly \$1 million will help increase COVID-19 testing among Pacific Islanders in Guam and Hawaii and seek to reveal infection patterns in those populations. The University of Guam is one of several partners in the “Puipuia le Ola” project of the University of Hawai‘i, funded by the National Institutes of Health, that will be developing and evaluating culturally tailored community engagement strategies to be disseminated in the native languages of Pacific Islander communities.



*Rachael Leon Guerrero*



*Teofila Cruz*

“There is a disparity in how COVID-19 is impacting Pacific Islanders, and this grant allows community-based organizations to specifically focus on this group and ultimately reduce the infection and mortality rate through health education and outreach,” said Rachael Leon Guerrero, vice provost of research and sponsored programs at the University of Guam.

Pacific Islanders are defined in the project as indigenous people having origins in Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau.

In Guam, residents originating from other islands in Micronesia comprise 7% of the island's population but account for 14% of COVID-19 cases. In Hawaii, Pacific Islanders comprise 4% of the state's population but account for nearly 30% of COVID-19 cases and 20% of all COVID-19 deaths.

According to the John A. Burns School of Medicine at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, Pacific Islanders commonly suffer from certain medical co-morbidities known to increase the risk of having severe COVID-19 symptoms. They also tend to have poor access to health care, lack adequate health insurance, live in multi-generational or overcrowded housing, and work in service jobs that increase their daily risk of exposure.

The work in Guam will be led by Teofila P. Cruz, a post-doctoral researcher with the Research Corporation of the University of Guam, a registered nurse, and an adjunct faculty member within UOG's School of Health.

The grant is part of the National Institutes of Health's Rapid Acceleration of Diagnostics (RADx) initiative, which is meant to accelerate innovative technologies for COVID-19 testing. A major component of the initiative is the RADx Underserved Populations (RADx-UP) program, which is focused on identifying factors associated with the disproportionately high infection rates and poor outcomes of COVID-19 in underserved and vulnerable populations and reducing related morbidity and mortality rates.

"This will be one of the first NIH-supported projects designed to sustain efforts not only for COVID-19 mitigation among Pacific Islanders, but for achieving the capacity and collective partnerships among Pacific Islanders to reach long-term goals of reducing long-standing health disparities," said Dr. Richard Yanagihara, a professor at the John A. Burns School of Medicine and one of the principal investigators, along with UH Mānoa's Angela Sy, Tina Tauasosi-Posiulai, and Dr. Wei-Kung Wang.

Lessons learned from this project will inform similar efforts for Pacific Islander communities and other underserved and vulnerable populations across the nation while expanding the reach of COVID-19 testing efforts, and subsequent COVID-19 vaccination campaigns, in Hawaii and Guam.

Titled "Puipuia le Ola," Samoan for "protecting life," the project is a transdisciplinary partnership among the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa; the University of Guam; Kalihi-Palama Health Center; Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander COVID-19 Response, Recovery, and Resilience Team (COVID 3R); Hawaii Public Housing Authority; Hawaii Affordable Housing Inc.; the American Samoa government; and multiple community-based organizations.

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