

JOB MARKET DEEP DIVE

7 Things That Will Surprise You About Working in Hawaii

What the job market in Hawaii actually looks like — and what it means for your paycheck.



FREE DOWNLOAD

Get the Full Guide

Inside: the real picture on unemployment, wages, licensing timelines, island-by-island differences, and what it actually costs to live and work here. Everything the relocation conversation usually skips — laid out clearly so you can make a smart move.

Disclaimer: This content is for informational purposes only. We are sharing publicly available labor market data, but conditions change and we cannot guarantee accuracy or reliability. Please do your own research and verify any information before making decisions based on this content.



Low Unemployment Doesn't Tell the Whole Story

The headline number is real — but it's not the number that matters for your job search.

Hawaii's **2.7% unemployment rate** is fourth lowest in the country. That sounds like a hot market. But payroll employment grew just **0.2%** year over year — essentially flat. Those two facts can coexist, and they tell very different stories.

The picture on openings is clearer: job vacancies dropped **40% since 2022** — from roughly 40,000 down to about 24,000. The openings rate is now **3.5%**, which has actually slipped below the national average of 4.3%.

So the market isn't collapsed — but it isn't booming either. There are simply fewer doors open than there were a few years ago.



Worth saying out loud: Unemployment measures who's out of work — not whether there's a job in your field, on your island, or at a salary that works for you. Those are entirely separate questions.

The dynamic here is a **tight but slow-growing market** — and that's a different challenge than a high-unemployment market. In a high-unemployment market, you compete against more candidates. Here, you're competing for fewer openings. Employers can still struggle to fill specific roles, and job seekers can still struggle to find the right fit — at the same time.

The unemployment rate tells you about residents. It doesn't tell you anything about whether the vacancies match your occupation, your credentials, or your target island.

The Five Sectors Driving Hawaii's Job Market

Five sectors shape most of Hawaii's job market. Here's what each one actually looks like on the ground.

⚠️ Your job becomes a Hawaii job the day you start working from here — whether your employer knows it or not. That triggers withholding obligations and a unique employer health coverage mandate no other state has. **Get it in writing before you move.**



Health Care & Social Assistance

79,500 jobs, up 3.5% YoY. Widest pay range of any sector — know which role you're entering.



Leisure & Hospitality

122,400 jobs, up 1.8%. The biggest sector — but tips and seasonality make income less predictable than wage tables suggest.



Construction & Trades

41,100 jobs, up 2.2%. Government contracts driving real momentum. Apprenticeships offer a solid wage path.



Public Service

Local government up 4.7%, but federal employment fell 8.0% to 32,200. A federal job plan deserves a closer look.



Remote & Self-Employed

Growing fast — but the General Excise Tax applies to nearly all business income from day one.

What Hawaii Jobs Actually Pay

The Minimum Wage Floor

Hawaii's minimum wage is **\$16.00/hr through 2027**, rising to **\$18.00 in January 2028**. Full-time at \$16 annualizes to **\$33,280 before taxes** — below the self-sufficiency benchmark in every single county. It's a starting point, not a living wage.

Mean Wages by Occupation (Urban Honolulu)

Management: **\$63.26/hr** · Healthcare practitioners: **\$62.04/hr** · Computer & math: **\$49.70/hr** · Construction: **\$40.71/hr** · Office & admin: **\$25.30/hr**. These are means, not starting offers — and they're Honolulu figures. Neighbor islands often run lower.

The National Wage Gap

Hawaii's average weekly wage is **\$1,387** against **\$1,654 nationally**. Hawaii pays below the national average while costing significantly more to live in. That gap is the core tension of working here.

A Note on Tipped Roles

Food service wage figures **include tips** — base hourly rates are lower. Factor that into any sector comparison you make, or you'll be working with inflated numbers.



The Salary Offer Is Only Half the Equation

The Self-Sufficiency Benchmark

The state publishes what one adult needs to cover basic costs — and in Hawaii, those numbers are higher than most people expect. The **2024 figures:**

- **Hawaii County:** \$41,893
- **Honolulu:** \$42,698
- **Maui County:** \$46,265
- **Kauai:** \$49,073

Now connect that to the wage floor: full-time at \$16/hr annualizes to **\$33,280 before taxes**. That's **26% short in Hawaii County** and **47% short on Kauai**. The minimum wage isn't a living wage — it's a starting point.

Inflation Makes It Worse

Honolulu prices were **5.6% higher in July** than a year earlier, with energy up **22.5%**. These benchmarks are a floor — not a current budget. Whatever you're planning around, plan higher.

Closing the Gap

\$41,893

Hawaii County Floor

2024 self-sufficiency benchmark for one adult

\$33,280

Min. Wage Annualized

Full-time at \$16/hr before taxes — below every county benchmark



Side work is common here — but budget it honestly. No benefits, no unemployment coverage, and General Excise Tax applies to gross receipts at 4.712%. A real second income is one that survives losing the first.

There's No Single "Hawaii Job Market"

Unemployment Varies Sharply by Island

July numbers: **Kauai at 2.4%**, Honolulu and Maui County at 2.8%, Lanai at 3.0%, Hawaii County at 3.5%, and **Molokai at 4.0%**. But the rate alone doesn't tell you much.

Scale matters more. The Honolulu metro carries about **461,500 payroll jobs**. The Kahului/Wailuku metro has 75,300. Oahu has the deepest mix of occupations — for specialized professional careers, it's often a requirement, not just a preference.

- Maui leans heavily on tourism: food prep and serving makes up **17% of employment** there, versus 12.2% in Urban Honolulu
- On smaller islands, a handful of employers can represent most of the market — losing one job there is a very different event than it would be on Oahu

The Bottom Line

A job offer in Honolulu and a job offer on Molokai are not the same event. Research the specific island's market depth before you commit to a location.

Beyond the Rate: What to Research

1 Check Occupation Mix

Don't just ask whether jobs exist — find out what share of that island's employment is actually in your field.

2 Count the Employers

On neighbor islands, figure out how many employers genuinely hire for your role. A thin market changes everything about your leverage and your risk.

3 Talk to People Already There

Workers who made the move know things no data set captures — hiring cycles, who's actually hiring, and what the real culture is like day to day.

Your License Determines Your Real Start Date

Hawaii Regulates More Than You Think

Hawaii regulates **52 professions and vocations** through 25 boards and 27 licensing programs — far more fields than most people expect. This catches a lot of movers off guard.

Your mainland license does **not automatically transfer**. Reciprocity varies by occupation, not across the board. What applies to a nurse doesn't apply to a contractor, and what applies in California doesn't apply in Texas.

Before you commit to anything, you need to confirm the exact **endorsement path, exam requirements, documentation needed, and realistic processing time** for your specific profession.

"Don't give notice. Don't sign a lease. Don't accept a start date — until you know the licensing timeline."

- A background check that clears in **three weeks on the mainland** can take considerably longer here
- The gap between arriving and being legally able to work is paid for **entirely out of your savings**

Before You Commit to a Start Date

01

Look Up Your Profession

Go to DCCA's Professional and Vocational Licensing division and confirm whether your occupation requires a Hawaii license. Don't assume — check.

02

Confirm Reciprocity

Ask directly whether your state's license transfers and under what conditions. Reciprocity is occupation-specific, not a blanket policy.

03

Get the Real Processing Time

Call the board and ask for actual current timelines — not estimates from the website. Then plan your finances around the slower end of that range.

04

Never Commit Before You Know

Do not give notice, sign a lease, or accept a start date until your licensing path is confirmed in writing. No exceptions.

What Actually Changes the Value of an Offer

Two Hawaii-specific factors that rarely make it into the relocation conversation — but belong in every offer evaluation.

📄 Unions Matter More Here Than Almost Anywhere

- About **145,000 workers** in Hawaii were union members in 2025 — **24.8% of the workforce** vs. 10% nationally
- In public service and parts of the trades, contract terms shape pay scales, benefits, seniority, and work rules more than individual negotiation will

"Know whether your target role is union-covered and what the current contract provides before you negotiate."

📄 Everything That Is Not Salary

- Health coverage, retirement, paid leave, parking/transit, and relocation assistance can move the real value of an offer by **thousands of dollars a year**
- *"In a high-cost state, that margin is what separates comfortable from stretched."*
- About **14,400 people** were working part time for economic reasons in 2025 — getting hired and getting enough hours are two different wins
- *"A quoted hourly rate means nothing if 40 hours aren't guaranteed."*

Where to Actually Look for Work in Hawaii

The right channels depend on your sector — here's where to start, and in what order.



HireNet Hawaii

Start here before the national aggregators. It's the state workforce portal and has labor market data you won't find on Indeed.



American Job Centers

Four county-based centers with free career counseling. Civil service and county roles often appear only here.



State of Hawaii Careers

The central portal for state civil service positions. It's separate from national job boards and updated independently.



DOE & University of Hawaii

Both run their own recruitment channels, separate from the state civil service portal. Federal roles post on USAJOBS.



DCCA Professional Licensing

Check this before anything else on this list. If your profession requires a Hawaii license, this step belongs first.



County human resources sites — Honolulu, Hawaii, Maui, and Kauai counties each post independently. Roles that never appear on aggregators are often found only through these channels.

BEFORE YOU ACCEPT

Questions to Ask Before You Say Yes

Two quick checklists — one for the offer, one for your household. Run both before you give notice.

About the Role

- Is my profession licensed in Hawaii, and how long does that path realistically take?
- Is the quoted pay hourly, salaried, tipped base, or total comp — and are 40 hours guaranteed?
- Which island and which exact worksite — and what does housing cost within reach of it?
- Is the role seasonal, per diem, on call, or variable schedule?
- What do health coverage, retirement, leave, parking, and relocation assistance add to the real value?

About Your Household

- If my household needs two incomes, has the second person researched their market too?
- If I'm bringing remote or contract income, is it already producing — and is it registered for GET?
- Does my employer know I'll be working from Hawaii, and have we confirmed the legal obligations in writing?
- Have I priced rentals near the actual worksite — not the island in general?
- Does my start date account for the real licensing timeline, not an optimistic one?

WHERE DO YOU STAND?

Three Honest Starting Positions

Before you make any move, figure out which of these describes you — it changes everything about your approach.



You Have a Written Offer in Hand

The strongest position there is. Use it to pressure-test housing before you accept — not after. Price rentals near the actual worksite, confirm the licensing timeline, and make sure the start date accounts for it.



You Have Savings or Portable Income

Also workable — and more common than people admit. If your income travels with you, spend that advantage on choosing the right island rather than the cheapest one. If you're searching from here, plan for a longer search than a mainland move would need.



You Have Neither

This is the one that ends badly — usually around month four. Build the offer or build the runway first. Arriving without either in the most expensive state in the country removes every option you'd want later.

❏ None of this is a reason to avoid the move — it's a reason to know your number while you still have room to plan.

A tropical beach scene at sunset. The sky is a mix of orange, yellow, and light blue. Several palm trees are silhouetted against the sky on the right side. The ocean has gentle waves washing onto a sandy beach. The overall tone is peaceful and serene.

Mahalo for Watching!

Do your research, know your numbers, and make the move on your terms.

Visit us at livinginhawaii.com