WORKING IN HAWAII

THE TRUTH ABOUT HAWAII JOBS

7 things nobody tells you about pay and work

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A move to Hawaii is not really a question about where you want to live. It is a question about the work that makes living here possible, and whether the paycheck attached to that work covers what life here actually costs.

The honest answer is more complicated than either version you usually hear. Hawaii is not a place where jobs are impossible to find, and it is not a place where a low unemployment rate means you will walk into one. Here is what the current numbers say, and what to research before you give notice anywhere.

1. LOW UNEMPLOYMENT DOES NOT MEAN EASY HIRING

As of August 2026, Hawaii's unemployment rate was 2.7 percent, fourth lowest in the country and well under the national 4.1 percent. That number gets quoted constantly, and it is the most misleading statistic in any relocation conversation.

Here is what sits behind it. Payroll employment in July was 642,700 jobs, up just 1,200 from a year earlier. That is 0.2 percent growth, which is close to flat. Unemployment is also higher than it was a year ago, when it sat at 2.2 percent. And job openings have cooled hard: Hawaii averaged about 24,000 openings in 2025, down from 40,000 in 2022, a 40 percent decline. The openings rate fell to 3.5 percent, now below the national 4.3 percent.

Read those together and you get a tight but slow growing market. Employers can genuinely struggle to fill specific roles while there are simply fewer vacancies than there were a few years ago. Low unemployment measures how many residents are out of work. It says nothing about whether the open jobs match your field, your license, your island, or your budget.

2. WHERE THE JOBS ACTUALLY ARE

Health care is the clearest growth engine. Health care and social assistance employed 79,500 people in July, up about 3.5 percent year over year, the strongest mix of scale and growth in the state. But in Urban Honolulu, practitioner and technical roles averaged $62.04 an hour while healthcare support averaged $23.50. The sector name tells you very little about the paycheck.

Hospitality is the biggest, and the most cyclical. Leisure and hospitality accounted for 122,400 jobs, up 1.8 percent, with accommodation and food services at 108,600. Maui deserves a caveat: July arrivals there were still only 83.4 percent of the pre wildfire July 2023 count. Plenty of openings, but schedules, seasonality, and tips make earnings far less predictable than a wage table suggests.

Construction and the trades have real momentum. Mining, logging, and construction hit 41,100 jobs, up 2.2 percent, helped by a rise in government contracts. Private residential permitting weakened earlier in the year though, so this is a mixed pipeline rather than a boom. Registered apprenticeships are one of the few routes into a solid Hawaii wage that does not require arriving with credentials.

Public service is splitting in two. State government employment rose about 1.2 percent and local government about 4.7 percent. Federal employment fell 8.0 percent to 32,200. If your plan involves a federal job, that trend deserves a much closer look than it would have two years ago.

And the fifth option is not a Hawaii job at all. Remote roles, freelance contracts, and virtual assistant work sidestep this entire section. No competing for cooled openings, no waiting on a license, no island limits. You are earning mainland rates against Hawaii costs, which is the most favorable version of this equation anyone gets, and it is why remote income has become a realistic path onto the neighbor islands where local wages run lowest.

One warning that catches people out. Your job becomes a Hawaii job the day you start working from here, whether or not your employer has thought about it. That can trigger withholding obligations for them, plus an employer health coverage mandate no other state has. For most people it is a benefit. For some, it is why a small mainland employer quietly decides the arrangement is not worth it. Get it in writing before you move.

3. WHAT THE WORK ACTUALLY PAYS

The minimum wage is $16.00 an hour through the end of 2027, rising to $18.00 in January 2028. Across all occupations, the mean was $34.59 an hour in Urban Honolulu and $33.04 in Kahului and Wailuku. Management averaged $63.26 in Honolulu, healthcare practitioners $62.04, computer and mathematical roles $49.70, construction and extraction $40.71, and office and administrative support $25.30 (BLS, May 2025).

Two cautions on those numbers. They are means, not starting offers, and averages hide enormous variation by employer and experience. And food service figures include tips, so they are not a base hourly wage. Statewide, the average weekly wage was $1,387 in early 2026 against $1,654 nationally, which is the cleanest single expression of the problem: Hawaii pays below the national average while costing far more than it.

4. THE OFFER IS ONLY HALF THE MATH

This is the section most people skip, and the one that decides whether the move lasts. The state publishes a self sufficiency benchmark for what one adult needs to cover basic costs. The 2024 figures were $41,893 in Hawaii County, $42,698 in Honolulu, $46,265 in Maui County, and $49,073 on Kaua‘i. Full time work at the $16 minimum wage annualizes to $33,280 before taxes, short of every county on that list, by about 21 percent in Hawaii County and 32 percent on Kaua‘i. Treat those as a floor, not a current budget. Honolulu prices were 5.6 percent higher in July than a year earlier, with energy up 22.5 percent.

Which is why many households close the gap with a second stream rather than a bigger salary. Side work is normal here. The test of a real second income is whether it survives losing the first, so it should already be producing before you move. Budget it like self employment: no benefits, no unemployment coverage, and General Excise Tax of 4.5 percent on gross receipts before expenses (up to 4.712 percent if you pass it on to customers).

5. THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS THE HAWAII JOB MARKET

A job offer in Honolulu and a job offer on Molokaʻi are not the same event, and the islands do not move together. July unemployment ran 2.4 percent on Kauaʻi, 2.8 percent in Honolulu and Maui County, 3.0 percent on Lānaʻi, 3.5 percent in Hawaii County, and 4.0 percent on Molokaʻi.

Scale matters more than the rate. The Honolulu metro carries about 461,500 payroll jobs against 75,300 in the Kahului and Wailuku metro. Oʻahu simply has the deepest mix of occupations, which is why specialized professional careers often make Oʻahu a requirement rather than a preference. Maui leans harder on visitors: food preparation and serving occupations are 17.0 percent of employment there versus 12.2 percent in Urban Honolulu, which makes the local economy more exposed to tourism conditions. On the smaller islands, a handful of employers can represent most of the market, so losing one job is a different event than it would be on Oʻahu.

6. YOUR LICENSE IS YOUR REAL TIMELINE

This is the most common avoidable mistake in a work related move. Hawaii regulates 52 professions and vocations through 25 boards and 27 licensing programs, covering far more fields than people expect. Your mainland license does not automatically transfer, and reciprocity varies by occupation rather than applying across the board.

Confirm the exact endorsement path, exam requirements, documentation, and realistic processing time before you commit to a start date, sign a lease, or give notice. A background check or civil service process that clears in three weeks on the mainland can take considerably longer here, and the gap between arriving and being legally able to work is paid for entirely out of your savings.

7. WHAT ACTUALLY CHANGES THE VALUE OF AN OFFER

Two Hawaii specific things belong in your evaluation and rarely make it in. The first is unions. About 145,000 workers here were union members in 2025, 24.8 percent of the workforce against 10.0 percent nationally. In public service and parts of the trades, contract terms shape pay scales, benefits, seniority, and work rules more than an individual negotiation will.

The second is everything that is not salary. Health coverage, retirement, paid leave, parking or transit, and relocation assistance can move the real value of an offer by thousands of dollars a year, and in a high cost state that margin is what separates comfortable from stretched. There is also a broader underemployment picture worth knowing: about 14,400 people here were working part time for economic reasons in 2025. Getting hired and getting enough hours are two different wins.

WHERE TO ACTUALLY LOOK FOR WORK

Start with the official channels rather than the national job boards, because civil service, education, and county roles often never appear on the aggregators.

- **HireNet Hawaii**. The state workforce portal for job search, resumes, and labor market information.
- **American Job Centers**. Four county based centers offering free career counseling and job search help.
- **State of Hawaii Careers**. The central portal for state civil service positions.
- **Department of Education and University of Hawaii**. Both run their own recruitment channels, separate from the state portal.
- **County human resources sites**. Honolulu, Hawaii, Maui, and Kaua‘i counties each post independently, and USAJOBS covers federal roles.
- **DCCA Professional and Vocational Licensing**. Check whether your occupation needs a license here before anything else on this list.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU ACCEPT AN OFFER

- Is my profession licensed in Hawaii, and how long does that path realistically take?
- Is the quoted pay hourly, salaried, tipped base, or total compensation, 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 offer?
- If my household budget needs two incomes, has the second person researched their market too?
- If I am bringing remote or contract income, is it already producing, and is it registered for GET?

THREE HONEST STARTING POSITIONS

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 no offer but real savings, or portable income. Also workable, and more common than people admit. If your income travels with you, you have skipped the hardest part of this guide, so spend that advantage on choosing the right island rather than the cheapest one. If you are searching from here instead, plan for a longer search than a mainland move would need given flat payroll growth and cooled vacancies, and know your number for when to change course.

You have neither. This is the one that ends badly, and it usually ends badly 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 would want later.

READY TO TALK IT THROUGH?

Scan the QR code to book a free, no pressure call. Bring the offer or the field you are trying to land in, the island you are considering, and your timeline, and we will walk the real numbers with you. What housing costs within commuting distance of that worksite, which areas fit the schedule you would actually be working, and whether renting first is the smarter opening move.

Because the people who build a life here are the ones who did the math on the work before they fell for the view.

Scan to Book a Time Here