JOB SEEKERS

LAND A JOB IN HAWAII

Industry + salary cheat sheet



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INDUSTRY + SALARY CHEAT SHEET

Hawaii has one of the lowest unemployment rates in the country. In August 2026 it sat at 2.7 percent against 4.1 percent nationally, fourth lowest of any state. Most people read that and assume the hiring here must be easy. It is the single most expensive assumption you can make about this move, because the number is low for a reason that works against you rather than for you. The state is barely adding jobs right now. It is simply not adding workers fast enough to leave any slack in the system. Openings come from turnover, not from growth, which means there are fewer of them than a 2.7 percent rate suggests and they tend to close quickly.

This guide walks through what that actually means for your job search. Which industries are adding people and which have been shedding them. What the work pays at the occupation level, using BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, May 2025 (released June 2026). How far those wages go once you account for what it costs to live here. And what happens if you plan to keep a mainland job and work remotely, which carries rules that surprise almost everyone who tries it.

The back of this guide is the cheat sheet itself. Every number here, condensed into tables you can print and keep beside you while you search. Read the sections first so the numbers mean something, then keep the back pages.

1. THE 2.7 PERCENT TRAP

Low unemployment with flat payrolls is a harder market to break into than high unemployment with rapid hiring, and Hawaii is currently the first of those. The most recent University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization forecast, from the third quarter of 2026, was a downgrade: UHERO now expects real growth of about 0.5 percent in 2026, down from more than 3 percent in 2025. Payroll growth is close to flat, up about 0.2 percent over the year. Health care and hospitality are adding jobs, construction is roughly flat, and federal employment is falling.

The unemployment rate stays low anyway because the working-age population is not growing either, and because people who cannot find work here tend to leave rather than stay and be counted. What that changes for you is timing. Assume the role you want takes longer to appear than it would on the mainland, and do not build a budget that depends on landing work in your first month.

2. INDUSTRIES THAT ARE HIRING

Four areas have real evidence behind them rather than just reputation:

Healthcare is the clearest opportunity in the state
The only sector with structural demand that does not depend on tourism, federal budgets, or the business cycle. Registered nurses alone account for roughly 12,900 jobs at a median wage of $65.54 an hour, or about $136,300 a year, placing RNs among the 25 largest occupations here. There is also a side door worth knowing: travel nursing runs around $2,254 a week statewide and has been quoted as high as $3,810 on crisis contracts, which is one of the few ways to arrive with income already running.

State and local government is adding jobs while federal shrinks
Adding jobs year over year, up roughly 1,400 positions. Hiring is slow and the pay will not impress anyone arriving from a mainland technology salary, but in a flat economy the stability is worth more than it looks. If you have public sector experience, this is where your application lands in the smallest pile.

The skilled trades remain hard to fill
Construction has flattened rather than growing, but the sector is projected to hold above 40,000 workers through 2031, carried by rail work, grid modernization at Hawaiian Electric, and the Lahaina rebuild. A licensed trade is one of the few credentials that converts into a living wage here quickly. Approach the contractors directly rather than waiting for postings.

Licensed professional work clears the cost of living
Three groups earn enough to absorb Hawaii prices with room left over: management at a $63.26 mean hourly wage, healthcare practitioners at $62.04, and computer and mathematical roles at $49.70 in urban Honolulu. If your credential sits in one of those, the challenge is finding the opening rather than affording the island once you do.

3. SHRINKING AND LOW-WAGE SECTORS

Federal work is no longer the safe landing

Federal employment here fell 8.0 percent over the year to 32,200 jobs in July 2026, with projections of roughly 4,500 losses through the end of 2026. Forecasters believe the downsizing has likely run its course, but that is a prediction rather than a guarantee. This matters most for military spouses and corporate transfers who arrive assuming federal work will be the dependable option while the household settles. For two years it has been the least dependable one.

Hospitality has the jobs but not the wages

Food preparation and serving is 12.2 percent of all Honolulu employment, so something is almost always available. The problem is the pay, at $22.20 an hour, roughly $46,200 a year, which does not cover life here without a second household income. That makes it a reasonable bridge job and a poor destination. One real exception is covered in section five.

Cyclical work carries more risk this year

With growth revised down to about 0.5 percent, roles that depend on discretionary spending or visitor volume are more exposed than they were a year ago. That does not make them unworkable. It makes them a poor choice for the one job you are counting on to justify the move.

4. WHAT THE WORK ACTUALLY PAYS

The figures here come from BLS Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics, May 2025 (released June 2026). The statewide median hourly wage is $27.08 across 627,530 jobs. That is about $56,300 a year, and half of everyone working in this state earns less than it.

Now hold that against what people assume, which is that Hawaii wages must be high to match Hawaii prices. They are not. The mean hourly wage in urban Honolulu is $34.59 against a national mean of $33.54, so Honolulu pays about 3 percent more than the country as a whole while costing dramatically more to live in. Maui's Kahului area comes in at $33.04, slightly below the national average.

That gap is the most important fact in this guide, and it is not something you can solve by searching harder, because it is a feature of the whole labor market rather than of any one employer. It is why so many households here run two incomes, and why arriving without confirmed income is a different kind of risk in Hawaii than it is in Phoenix or Nashville. The top end does get large, with physicians at a $163.12 median hourly wage, but that describes a few thousand people rather than the market you are entering.

5. HOW YOUR ISLAND CHANGES THE MATH

Unemployment is not uniform, and the spread runs opposite to what most people expect. Kaua‘i is tightest at 2.5 percent, Honolulu and Maui sit at 2.9 percent, and Hawaii County and the Maui County islands of Lāna‘i and Moloka‘i run from 3.4 to 3.6 percent. O‘ahu still has the most jobs by volume and the widest range of professional roles, but it is also one of the tightest markets and the most expensive place to sit while you search.

The Maui exception nobody mentions

Food preparation and serving is 17.0 percent of all employment in the Kahului area, and it pays $29.39 an hour there against $22.20 in Honolulu. Resort wage pressure is real and island specific. For anyone working hospitality while they establish themselves, that is more than seven dollars an hour of difference, and it runs directly against the standard advice to head for Honolulu because that is where the jobs are. For this kind of work, the jobs are better on Maui.

6. BRINGING YOUR OWN JOB WITH YOU

Keeping a mainland job is the most common plan among people moving here, and the one most likely to fall apart for reasons that have nothing to do with your performance. Three rules do the damage, and almost nobody hears about them until the decision is already made.

The Prepaid Health Care Act

Hawaii is the only state with a law like this. Employers must cover anyone working 20 or more hours a week for four consecutive weeks, pay at least half the premium, and cap the employee's share at 1.5 percent of wages, with no exemption for small employers. The part that catches people is the reach: it applies to a person living in Hawaii who telecommutes for an out-of-state employer, with no business presence here required. Your company may find that letting you move creates an obligation it never agreed to, and the simplest way to avoid that is to say no.

The General Excise Tax on your own invoices

If you are a freelancer or contractor rather than an employee, the General Excise Tax applies to your billings even when every client is on the mainland. The rate is 4.5 percent in every county (up to 4.712 percent if passed on to clients), and it taxes gross receipts rather than profit, so it lands whether or not an engagement made you money. Build it into your rates before you move.

Where your income gets taxed

Your employer generally does not have to withhold Hawaii tax if you work here 60 days or fewer in a year, but the income can still be taxable here. A permanent move ends that exemption. Your employer may also need to register for Hawaii withholding, which is a second reason a remote request gets refused.

7. LICENSES, BOARDS, AND HOW HIRING REALLY WORKS

Your credential does not travel with you

Hawaii runs its own licensing boards and rarely publishes timelines. Nursing is the clearest example: the state is not a member of the Nurse Licensure Compact, so a multistate license does not let you work here. You need a Hawaii license by endorsement, verified through Nursys, with a temporary permit possible while you wait. The principle generalizes to every regulated profession. Start the paperwork before you ship your car, because people routinely lose two to three months of earnings to a form they could have filed from the mainland.

Most professional roles move before they are posted

Local recruiters and employers consistently describe Hawaii as a relationship-driven market, where professional roles often move through referrals before appearing publicly. That is a characterization rather than a measured statistic, so treat it as a signal rather than a hard number. Either way the advice is the same: start before you arrive, build relationships with local recruiters, join your professional association, and do not treat the national job boards as the whole market. It also helps to know the large institutions, since in a market this size they account for much of the professional hiring. The full list is in the cheat sheet.

WHAT YOU CAN CONTROL, AND WHAT YOU CAN'T

• You cannot control how few openings exist, but you can control whether you hear about them. In a referral-driven market, that means recruiters and associations rather than job boards.
• You cannot make Hawaii wages match mainland wages, but you can choose a field where the gap is smallest. Healthcare, the licensed trades, and public sector work travel here better than most.
• You cannot change your employer's answer on the health coverage requirement, but you can get that answer early and in writing, while you still have every option open.
• You cannot speed up a licensing board, but you can file months earlier than most people do, and a temporary permit is often available while you wait.
• You cannot control which island has work in your field, but you can check the county unemployment spread before you commit to an address.
• You cannot avoid the General Excise Tax on freelance income, but you can price it in from your first invoice instead of absorbing it for a year and then noticing.

THE CHEAT SHEET

Every number in this guide on two pages. Print it and keep it beside you while you search

WHAT PEOPLE ASSUME, AND WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

The Assumption	The Reality
2.7 percent unemployment means plenty of openings	Few openings, created by turnover rather than growth
The economy must be booming	Growth revised down to about 0.5 percent for 2026
I will find something once I arrive	Openings come from turnover and close fast. Plan for a longer search.
Wages must be high to match the cost of living	Honolulu pays about 3 percent above the national average
Federal work is the safe landing	Federal jobs down 8.0 percent over the year
Honolulu is where the jobs are	Hawaii County and Moloka‘i are looser, and Maui pays more in hospitality

WAGES BY OCCUPATIONAL GROUP

Occupational group	Mean hourly	Approx. annual
Management, Urban Honolulu	$63.26	~$131,600
Healthcare practitioners and technical, Urban Honolulu	$62.04	~$129,000
Computer and mathematical, Urban Honolulu	$49.70	~$103,400
Statewide median, all occupations	$27.08	~$56,300
Food prep and serving, Honolulu	$22.20	~$46,200

THE HIGHEST PAID ROLES IN THE STATE

Occupation	Median hourly	Approx. annual
Physicians, all other	$163.12	~$339,000
Obstetricians and gynecologists	$162.56	~$338,000
Psychiatrists	$139.42	~$290,000
Registered nurses	$65.54	~$136,300

HOW HAWAII WAGES COMPARE NATIONALLY

Metro area	Mean hourly wage	Versus national
Urban Honolulu	$34.59	about 3% above
United States	$33.54	baseline
Kahului-Wailuku	$33.04	slightly below

UNEMPLOYMENT BY COUNTY AND ISLAND, AUGUST 2026

County	Rate	County or island	Rate
Kauaʻi	2.5%	Hawaii County	3.4%
Honolulu	2.9%	Lānaʻi (Maui County)	3.4%
Maui	2.9%	Molokaʻi (Maui County)	3.6%

THE LARGEST EMPLOYERS TO KNOW

Employer	Approx. staff	Sector
Queen's Health Systems	7,450 to 9,200	Healthcare
Hawaii Pacific Health	6,950 to 7,439	Healthcare
Hawaiian Electric Industries	~3,597	Utilities
Kamehameha Schools	~3,248	Education
Kaiser Permanente Hawaii	~2,356	Healthcare

Plus Bank of Hawaii, First Hawaiian Bank, and the state Department of Education. Headcounts vary by source depending on whether part-time and per-diem staff are counted, so treat them as ranges.

IF YOU ARE WORKING REMOTELY, THE THREE RULES

Rule	What it means for you
Prepaid Health Care Act	Coverage required at 20+ hours a week for 4 consecutive weeks. Employer pays 50%+ of premium, your share capped at 1.5% of wages. Applies to mainland employers with no presence here.
General Excise Tax	4.5% in every county (up to 4.712% if passed on to clients). Applies to freelance and consulting billings even when all clients are on the mainland. Taxes gross receipts, not profit.
State income tax	Employer generally need not withhold Hawaii tax if you work here 60 days or fewer a year, but the income can still be taxable here. A permanent move ends that exemption. Employer may need to register for withholding.

WHERE TO START, DEPENDING ON YOU

You are keeping a mainland job. Your first move is not a job search, it is a conversation with your employer about the health coverage requirement and state withholding. Get a written answer before anything else is decided.

You work in healthcare. You are in the strongest position of anyone reading this. File for your Hawaii license by endorsement now, and look at travel contracts as a way to arrive with income already running while you find a permanent role.

You are a trade professional. Check your licensing board requirements early, then approach the rail, utility, and rebuild contractors directly rather than through listings. These roles are among the hardest to fill locally.

You are a military spouse or corporate transfer. Do not assume federal employment is the safe option. It has been the shrinking sector. Build your plan around healthcare, state and local government, or a remote arrangement already confirmed in writing.

You are early career or changing fields. Look hard at Hawaii County, where the market is measurably looser, and at the Kahului area if hospitality is your bridge job. Plan on a second income, because the median wage does not stretch the way the brochures imply.

WANT TO KNOW IF YOUR NUMBERS WORK?

Scan the QR code to book a free, no-pressure call. Bring your field, target salary and island, and we will walk through what that role realistically pays here, which employers to approach, and how that income compares with the cost of living there.

Working remotely? Bring your employer's position on the health coverage requirement too. It is the fastest way to see whether the plan holds up before you commit.

Scan to Book a Time Here