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## ClimbHI finds new ways to connect amid Covid

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When workforce development nonprofit ClimbHI first launched its virtual career training portal in 2019, President and CEO Julie Morikawa envisioned that it would serve as a platform for students to connect with businesses for things like volunteering to help at events and attending job fairs.

Of course, amid Covid-19, the type of opportunities that students could access has changed, but in many ways, the ClimbHI Bridge portal has become even more valuable.

“The ability to be remote has really increased the amount of students that can be reached,” Morikawa told PBN.

“We’re seeing businesses being able to speak to many students in one go versus having to go to different schools like they did before. So we are really seeing the business community embracing this,” she added.

So far, more than 200 Hawaii businesses have signed up for the ClimbHI Bridge — and more are being added every week.

“There are categories like internships, site visits, things that are not going to be heavily populated during this time because of the pandemic,” Morikawa said. “But with that being said, there are still



COURTESY OF CLIMBHI

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companies out there who have figured out how to do remote internships, or they are doing virtual site visitations, or they are accepting groups in a Covid-safe manner. It's all still there, it's all being offered, but with the virtual nature of the environment right now, it's really led to even more interactions and even more reach."

"It's been great ... so we are looking forward to continued success as we bring in more businesses and more teachers," she added.

While the platform has been live since mid-2019, it officially launched in December 2020 in partnership with the Hawaii Department of Education, with support from the Hawaii Executive Collaborative, which has committed to funding the program for five years.

With the portal's expansion, more than 1,000 educators have enrolled on the platform, and it has reached more than 4,000 students to date. ClimbHI is currently working with the DOE to provide virtual training for teachers and administrators and aims to have the platform rolled out at all Hawaii public schools by the end of the year. It's launching first in high schools, and will also be introduced to intermediate and elementary schools.

Morikawa said that the support has allowed ClimbHI to expand the platform not just in numbers, but also in scope.

Morikawa founded ClimbHI in 2011 with the goal of educating students about future career options. Much of the organization's focus has been on the tourism industry — its largest initiative is the LEI program (for lead, expose, inspire), an annual event where high schoolers spend a day learning about the hospitality industry through hotel tours and a career fair filled with tourism-related businesses.

But the ClimbHI Bridge is attracting businesses from a range of sectors, including finance, nonprofits, restaurants, health care and more.

"It expands to all different areas. ... There is a place for everyone on the portal," Morikawa noted.

Matt Ramsey, director of the nonprofit Conservation International Hawaii, said in a statement that the platform has been "a game-

changer” for his organization.

“It takes a lot of effort to familiarize yourself with the opportunities that exist, and a lot of effort to reach out to individual students. But with ClimbHI it became super efficient and super fun,” he said. “You just put your information out there, and then you have people contact you.”

Morikawa explained that she created the platform after hearing from both educators and businesses that “there is a big need for a centralized tool.”

But, she noted, “the technology is secondary.”

“The primary point of what we are doing is to create a network — it’s about connecting to people, it’s about connecting businesses with the educators and with the students. The tool is just the conduit — it’s just the way to keep everything organized and get these people together,” Morikawa said.

Meanwhile, ClimbHI also is in the process of pivoting the LEI program to a virtual format for this year’s event, slated to take place in April.

“Now, more than ever, it’s really important to bring awareness about the value of the visitor industry to Hawaii,” said Morikawa. “We felt that it was important to do something, so we are going to be modifying it to be a really robust virtual concept.”

She said they’re creating video content that will showcase career opportunities in hotels and the broader hospitality industry. While the remote format might not be quite as hands-on as prior LEI events, there is one big advantage: “We usually include about 1,000 students in person, but with this one virtual event, we are hoping to go well beyond 2,000 attendees,” Morikawa said.

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