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ClimbHI pilots new initiative to introduce students to the tourism industry

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Local workforce development nonprofit ClimbHI launched a pilot program last week for a new initiative called LEI Assembly. An offshoot of its hospitality-focused LEI program (for Leadership, Exploration and Inspiration), LEI Assembly aims to familiarize younger students with the opportunities available in the tourism industry.

ClimbHI hosted the first event Nov. 7 at Roosevelt High School for the school's entire freshman class, which is comprised of about 400 students.

"We wanted to start expanding into the campuses and offer on-campus experiences," explained Julie Morikawa, ClimbHI president and CEO. "LEI is an off-campus experience, and it's further down the funnel of interest level. We want to capture interest earlier."

"The industry has many challenges out there, especially during times of low unemployment, so it's extremely important that we're getting out there earlier and catching even more students," she continued. "We want to show them the vast variety of careers that are available to them here at home in Hawaii."

Morikawa said that she strategically timed the event in early November, ahead of when the freshmen are expected to select their Career and Technical Education pathway.

During the hour-long assembly, students heard from a range of hospitality professionals, who represented businesses including Hawaiian Airlines, Waikiki Resort Hotel, International Market Place and more, as well as recent Roosevelt grads who are now working in the industry. Representatives from University of Hawaii at Manoa, Kapiolani Community College, and Hawaii Pacific University were also on hand to discuss hospitality courses of study.

The main LEI program, which Morikawa created in 2011 and is funded by Hawaii Tourism Authority, is an annual day-long event that leads high schoolers through hotel tours and a tourism-related career fair. This year's event drew more than 500 students and 50 teachers from 22 high schools on Oahu alone, and more than 1,000 high school students, 150 college students and 110 businesses statewide.

The goal of the LEI Assembly pilot, Morikawa said, was to gauge student interest and gather feedback. So far, she said, it's been positive.

"They told us things like, 'we didn't want it to end,' and that's exactly what we wanted to have happen," she said.

The next step will be to grow the program.

"We would like to make it scalable and replicable across many campuses. We want to get more locations, more campuses, and more students," she said, adding that her goal would be to have LEI Assembly become available statewide.

Morikawa said that ClimbHI will seek funding for the program from HTA and the state Department of Education, as well as private businesses. Depending on growth of the program, she said, ClimbHI may hire additional employees to facilitate LEI Assembly.

Christina O'Connor
Reporter
Pacific Business News



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