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Hawaii Had Fifteen School Interpreter Jobs and Eighty-One Deaf Children Who Needed Them. Three Jobs Were Filled.

Heather Grizzle · November 18, 2026

Hawaii's DOE had 15 educational interpreter positions and 3 filled for an estimated 81 deaf students. No classroom interpreter standard exists.

Contents

1. One district, one school
2. A free dorm, a free flight
3. A school getting smaller
4. Three interpreters for 81 children
5. No standard, no pipeline
6. The money that does not move
7. What the department publishes, and what it does not
8. A count with no geography
9. A school that teaches the islands
10. A language law with no duty
11. The office that credentials interpreters
12. Money for screening, none for a voucher
13. Questions Hawaii is positioned to answer

Every Sunday evening, a deaf ten-year-old from Kahului walks through the Maui airport with a school escort and boards a flight to Honolulu. By bedtime he is in a dormitory on Leahi Avenue, at the foot of Diamond Head, where everyone around him signs. On Friday afternoon he flies home. The state pays for the tickets, the ground transportation and his dinners. His mother made that choice because, at their home

school, he would need an interpreter to follow his teacher, and on Maui there was no one to hire.

He is a composite. The flights, the escort and the missing interpreters are not. Hawaii runs its entire public school system as a single statewide district, so there is no local district for a family to search and no money that moves between districts for a deaf child. There is one school for deaf children in the state, one dormitory, and a statewide shortage of sign language interpreters so severe that the state's own access board put a number on it. Version 2.0 of the National Deaf Education Data Index read every instrument it could find and every public school unit in Hawaii to see what the state publishes about the children who do not fly to Honolulu.

IN BRIEF

- Hawaii's Department of Education has fifteen statewide positions for educational interpreters. At the end of 2024, three were filled, one on Oahu and two on Hawaii island, while an estimated 81 students needed ASL interpreting.
- In June 2026, the state's list of credentialed sign language interpreters named twelve people in Hawaii. It listed none on Maui or Kauai.
- Hawaii has no interpreter training program. The 2026 bills to start one at the University of Hawaii died in committee, and no rule sets a qualification for interpreters who work in classrooms.
- The Hawaii School for the Deaf and the Blind enrolled 49 students in 2024-25, down from 62 in 2019-20. It teaches in ASL and English, and says "No speech is used."
- Hawaii counted 207 students with hearing impairment in fall 2024. None of the 40 charter schools publishes anything about serving them.

HOW THIS WAS MEASURED

The National Deaf Education Data Index reads what a state and its schools publish about deaf and hard of hearing students. It does not visit classrooms, survey families or rate services. For Hawaii, version 2.0 of the state file read 57 units: the Department of Education as the state's single local education agency, its fifteen complex areas, the 40 charter schools on the State Public Charter School Commission's roster and one charter that operated in 2024-25 and has since closed. Charter schools were read in a full browser on 15 and 16 October 2026. The department's enrollment counts for ten years, its budget documents, the Board of Education's rules and the Disability and Communication Access Board's reports were read as original documents.

Each unit receives one code. PROGRAM means the unit publishes something specific to deaf and hard of hearing students. MENTION means hearing appears only in a general way. NONE FOUND means the pages were read and nothing specific was published.

The codes measure publication, not service. The Index never estimates a missing figure, and where two published figures disagree it records both. Before release, the state bodies the file names received notice and ten business days to correct it.

One district, one school

Hawaii's constitution provides for "a statewide system of public schools," and the Department of Education is the only local education agency in the state. It runs nearly three hundred schools through fifteen complex areas. Charter schools, authorized by a separate commission, are the only public schools outside it.

The Hawaii School for the Deaf and the Blind is one of the department's schools, school code 470, with a principal and no board. It has no founding statute. Its only appearance in the Hawaii Revised Statutes is a section about houseparents' pay that still uses the school's 1989 name. It describes itself as "a pre-K to 12th grade plus school that serves Deaf and Hard of Hearing students throughout the State of Hawaii, Oahu and the six neighboring islands," and as "the only bilingual-bicultural school in Hawaii." It was reaccredited in 2025 through June 2031.

Its language policy is unusually direct: "HSDB is an ASL-English bilingual school, where students learn to be competent in both ASL and English. Students receive direct instruction from their teachers in American Sign Language (ASL). No speech is used. Students and staff communicate directly with each other, without the need for an interpreter." Because most of its students are Native Hawaiian or from the Pacific islands, it also teaches Hawaiian culture, history, dance, food and language.

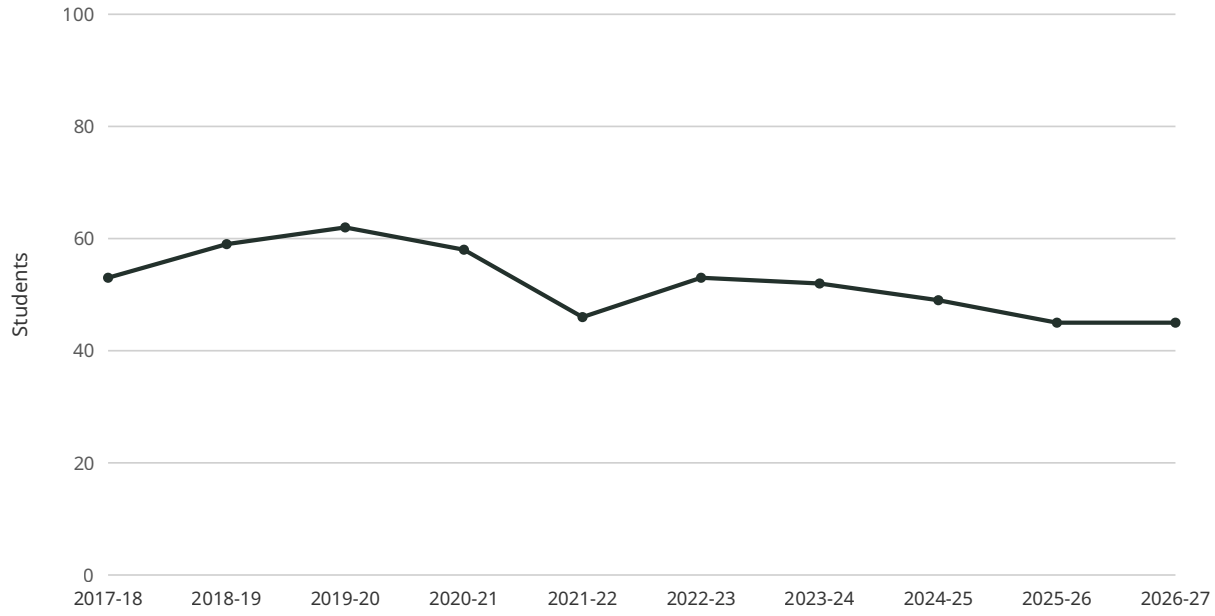
A free dorm, a free flight

Education at the school is free, and so is the residential program, with priority for children from the neighbor islands. Children must be at least eight and have "independent self-care skills" to board. Oahu children can board if they live at least 90 minutes away and space allows. The school pays "the cost of airfare, ground transportation, and dinners," and escorts children twelve and under. The week runs from Sunday evening to Friday afternoon.

The path in runs through the home school. A family shows the home school proof that its child is deaf or hard of hearing, the IEP team decides eligibility and placement, and "By law, students cannot enroll at HSDB without first enrolling in, and being released from their local school." The school's admissions page lists three placement options. The second is "placement at a nearby regular education school for hearing students that has a program for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students with supports." No department page the Index read identifies a single school with such a program.

A school getting smaller

The department's official enrollment counts for ten years show the school at 53 students in 2017-18, rising to 62 in 2019-20, and then sliding: 58, 46, 53, 52, 49 in 2024-25, and 45 in each of the two years since. That is a decline of about a fifth over the decade. The school's own pages do not discuss it.



Hawaii School for the Deaf and the Blind enrollment

View data

X	Students
2017-18	53
2018-19	59
2019-20	62
2020-21	58
2021-22	46
2022-23	53
2023-24	52
2024-25	49
2025-26	45
2026-27	45

Those numbers include blind and deafblind students, and the school publishes no split. Its staff directory lists 23 teachers, nine educational assistants, ten housepar- ents, one speech-language pathologist, a counselor, a behavioral specialist and a li- brarian. The department budgeted $4,115,326 in general funds for the school in fiscal 2025, across 58 permanent and 5 temporary positions. Its final per-pupil expenditure report shows $3,901,909 spent.

Three interpreters for 81 children

The finding that defines Hawaii is not about the school. It is about every deaf child who is not in it.

In 2024 the Legislature passed Act 204, which asked the Disability and Communica- tion Access Board to study the interpreter shortage. The board's report, dated 23 De- cember 2024, states that the department "has fifteen (15) statewide positions for Edu- cational Interpreters." Then: "Three (3) positions are filled: One (1) on the island of

O′ahu. Two (2) on the island of Hawai′i." Two statewide requests for proposals estimated that "eighty-one (81) students require ASL interpreter services" across 258 schools.

EDUCATIONAL INTERPRETERS IN HAWAII, DECEMBER 2024

15
statewide educational interpreter positions

3
positions filled

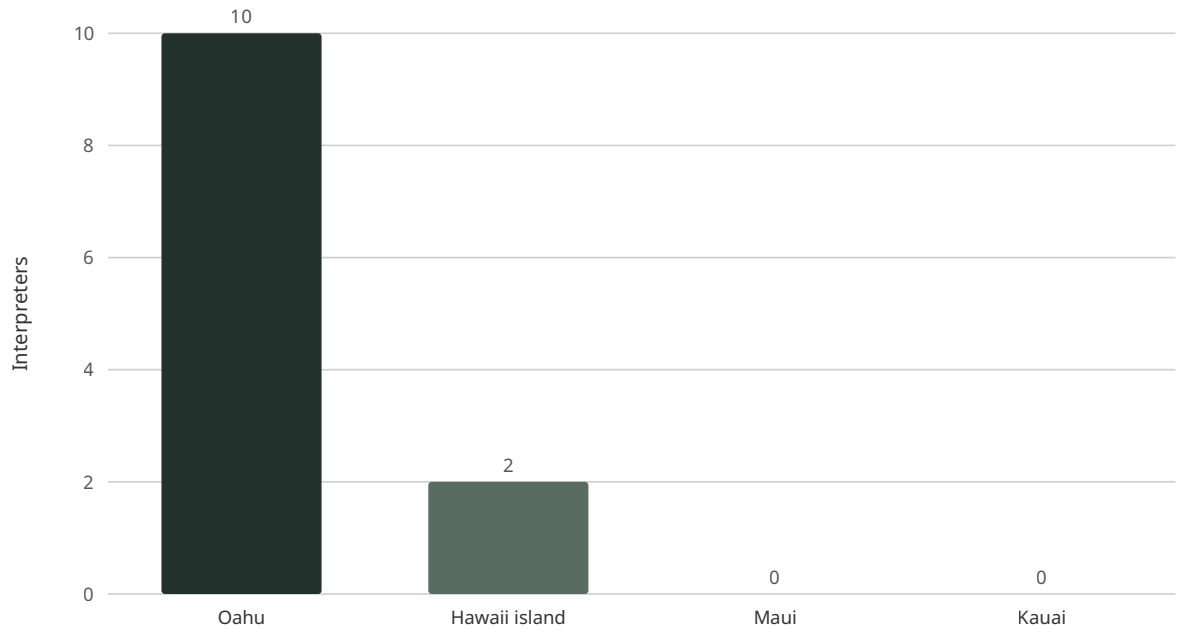
81
students estimated to need ASL interpreting

0
interpreter positions filled on Maui, Kauai, Molokai or Lanai

Source: Disability and Communication Access Board, Act 204 report to the Legislature, 23 December 2024

Other instruments give other numbers. The department's own personnel report for 2024-25 counts 5 full-time interpreters and no audiologists statewide. The federal personnel file for 2023-24 counts 10.02 full-time interpreters and 0.04 full-time audiologists. Three instruments, three definitions, and the Index shows them side by side. None of them comes close to fifteen.

The pool the department would hire from is tiny. In June 2026, the board's list of credentialed sign language interpreters named twelve people living in Hawaii, ten on Oahu and two on Hawaii island. Maui and Kauai were marked "No Listed Interpreters." In fiscal 2024-25 the board issued 23 state interpreter credentials and tested 3 applicants.



Credentialed sign language interpreters living in Hawaii, by island, June 2026

View data

Category	Interpreters
Oahu	10
Hawaii island	2
Maui	0
Kauai	0

No instrument says which schools the three filled positions serve, or how the other 78 children got through a school day. The Index does not infer it. What it can say is that a deaf child on Maui who needs an interpreter at her home school is, by the state's own count, waiting for one.

No standard, no pipeline

Behind the shortage is a rule that does not exist. The Board of Education's special education rule, Hawaii Administrative Rules chapter 8-60, sets eligibility for deaf and hard of hearing students and requires IEP teams to consider "direct communications with peers and professional personnel in the student's language and communication mode." It names no qualification for an educational interpreter. The only place the Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment appears in Hawaii law is a Department of Health rule that admits an EIPA score of 4.0 to a provisional state credential for communication access in state programs, not in classrooms.

There is also no place to train. The Act 204 report found no interpreter training program in Hawaii and recommended one at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. In the 2026 session, three bills to fund it, HB2489, SB2412 and HB2588, died in committee. The working group Act 204 created dissolved in June 2025. The one deaf-related measure the Legislature enacted in 2026 adds a deafness designation to motor vehicle registrations.

The money that does not move

> Three (3) positions are filled: One (1) on the island of O'ahu. Two (2) on the island of Hawai'i.
>
> Disability and Communication Access Board, December 2024

In most states, the Index asks which district sends its deaf students where, and who pays. In Hawaii those questions have no form. There is one budget. The school is a line inside the department's special education program, EDN 150, which carried $469.5 million in general funds in fiscal 2025. Hawaii's Weighted Student Formula sends the school nothing. The department's Special Education Per Pupil Allocation weights three disabilities, and hearing impairment is not one of them.

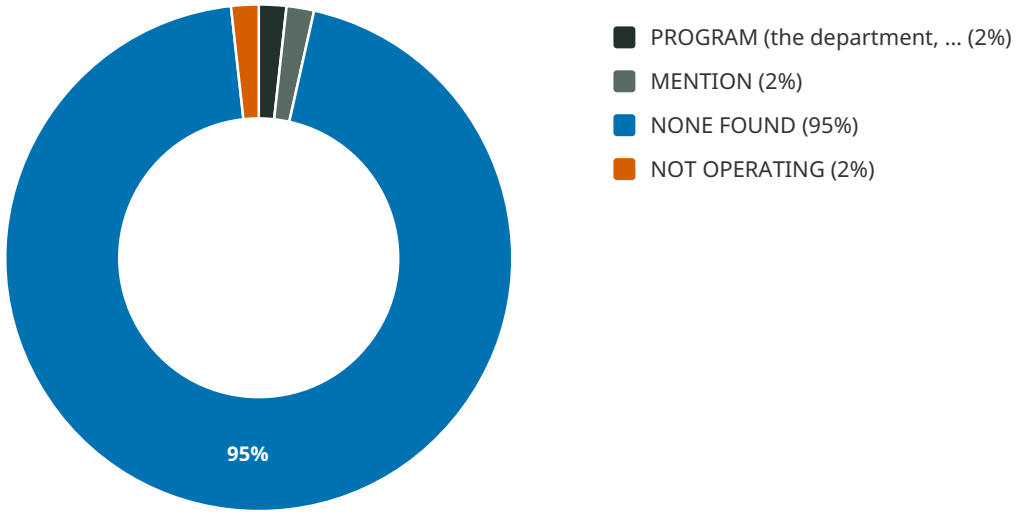
The constitution closes the private route. Article X bars public money "for the support or benefit of any sectarian or nonsectarian private educational institution," and an Attorney General's opinion says a voucher would violate it. Hawaii has no vouchers, no scholarships and no education savings accounts.

What the department publishes, and what it does not

The Index coded the department PROGRAM because it operates the school, and the school publishes plenty. Beyond the school's own pages, the department publishes almost nothing. Its special education pages, child find, parent rights, directory, regulations and data pages, name no deaf or hard of hearing service. The only hearing term outside the school page is a child find line: "Your child seems to have difficulty seeing or hearing." Its directory of district educational specialists by complex area lists no hearing, vision or low-incidence role.

The fifteen complex areas have no websites of their own, only directory entries. One, Farrington-Kaiser-Kalani, mentions the school because the school is on its list. The other fourteen say nothing.

The 40 charter schools say nothing either. The Index read each one in a full browser, twice where needed. Forty-four keyword hits across the two days turned out to be the federal school-meal nondiscrimination statement, "we look forward to hearing from you," drill bells and newsletter sign-ups. Under state law, HRS 302D-30, the department remains responsible for a free appropriate public education for every charter student, and must provide services if the charter cannot. The department publishes no account of how it does so for deaf students.



Hawaii's 57 public school units, by what they publish

View data

Category	Units
PROGRAM (the department, as the school's operator)	1
MENTION	1
NONE FOUND	54
NOT OPERATING	1

A count with no geography

Hawaii counted 207 students with hearing impairment in fall 2024, 185 of school age and 22 in early childhood, in both the federal file and the department's own data viewer. The federal file shows 41 of the 185 in a separate school. No Hawaii instrument publishes the count by complex area or school, so the Index's publication measure cannot be computed.

The deafblind numbers diverge sharply, as they do in most states. The federal file shows one student whose primary category is deaf-blindness. The national deafblind count, which includes every child with combined vision and hearing loss, counted 52 Hawaii children on 1 December 2024 and 56 served during the year.

At birth, the Department of Health runs newborn hearing screening and says, on an undated page, that "Fifty to sixty infants and toddlers are identified with hearing loss each year in Hawaii." It publishes no screening rate. Early intervention lists "Severe sensory impairments" among qualifying conditions but does not name hearing loss as an automatic one. A 2016 law says early intervention "may include" deaf mentors and ASL teachers for families. It is permissive, it carries no appropriation, and the working group it created ended in 2018.

The families who find help mostly find it outside the department: at the Comprehensive Service Center for People Who Are Deaf, Hard of Hearing, or Deaf-Blind in Honolulu, a one-stop referral service run through the University of Hawaii, and at Hands & Voices Hawaii.

A school that teaches the islands

The Hawaii School for the Deaf and the Blind is plain about its approach: students "receive direct instruction from their teachers in American Sign Language (ASL). No speech is used." What it adds is particular to Hawaii. "With the majority of our students being either Hawaiian or from the Pacific islands," the school teaches "Hawaiian culture, history, dance, food, language, and more." It offers parents "the opportunity to learn ASL, on campus, online, and on neighboring islands." Its robotics and LEGO teams "compete with hearing schools throughout Hawaii."

For a deaf child from a Native Hawaiian or Micronesian family, that combination matters. A bilingual school in ASL and English is one thing. A bilingual school that also treats the child's home culture as part of the curriculum is another, and it is the only such setting in the state. Everywhere else, a deaf child is one student in a department school with no published deaf program, on an island where the interpreter list may have no names at all.

A language law with no duty

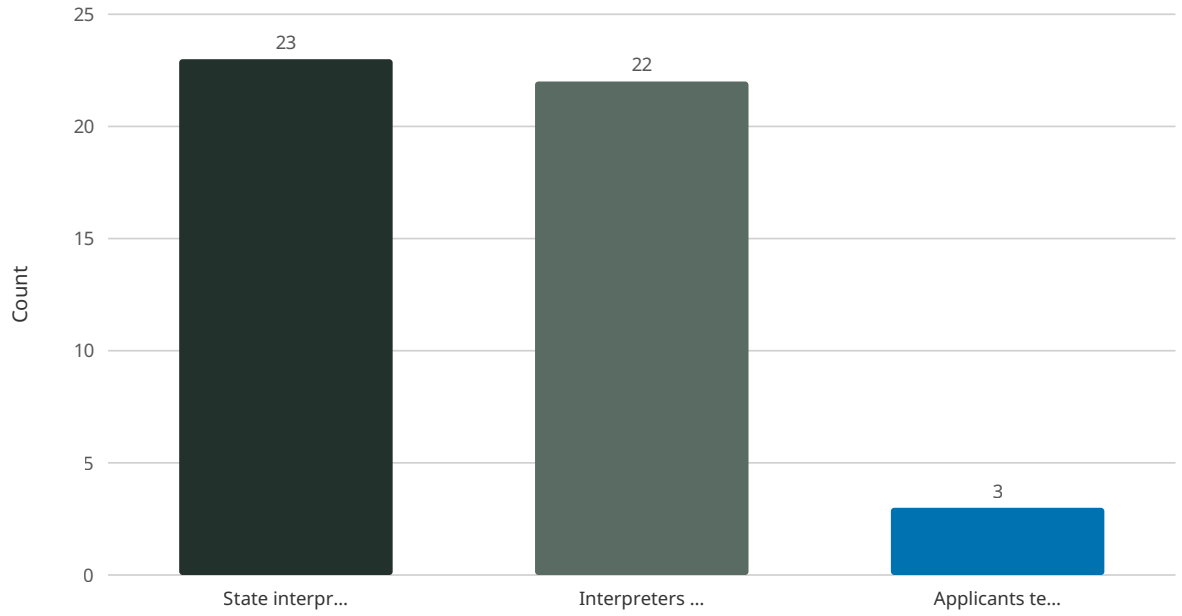
Hawaii's statute on language for deaf children, HRS 321-352.2, sits in the Department of Health's part of the code and is permissive. It names, among the services early intervention "may" include, "service providers and mentors of the deaf who use oral language," alongside signing mentors. There is no appropriation attached. A working group under Act 177 was meant to carry the work forward. It ceased in 2018.

Hawaii has no deaf child's bill of rights and no law requiring that deaf children's language be tracked. The 2026 session passed none. A separate statute recognizes American Sign Language as a world language and lets any public school offer it as a course. No department page read lists which schools do, and no charter school's site mentions one.

The Index's interpretation, marked as such. In a state with one school district, one deaf school and a federal count of about two hundred deaf children, a statewide language tracking duty would be unusually easy to carry out. Every child is already in one system. The barrier is not structure. It is that no law asks for it.

The office that credentials interpreters

The Disability and Communication Access Board runs the Hawaii Quality Assurance System and the state's interpreter credential. In fiscal 2024-25 it issued 23 Hawaii State Sign Language Interpreter credentials, tested 3 applicants under the quality assurance system and carried 22 interpreters in its continuing education program. It "explored possible solutions, and collected data from other states" on the shortage the Legislature asked it to study. Its 2020 manual and fee schedule govern how state agencies buy interpreting. They do not govern schools.



Disability and Communication Access Board interpreter activity, fiscal 2024-25

View data

Category	Count
State interpreter credentials issued	23
Interpreters in continuing education	22
Applicants tested under HQAS	3

The gap between 23 credentials issued and 12 credentialed interpreters living in Hawaii on the June 2026 list is not explained by any page read. Credentials can be held by people who live elsewhere, lapse, or cover different levels. But it is the kind of figure a family on Maui would want explained.

Money for screening, none for a voucher

The federal Health Resources and Services Administration awarded 235,000 dollars each to the Department of Health and the University of Hawaii System for newborn hearing work in fiscal 2024. The health department's page says that "Fifty to sixty in-

fants and toddlers are identified with hearing loss each year in Hawaii." No state screening rate is published.

Hawaii also has no private school choice of any kind. Article X, section 1 of the state constitution bars public money to private schools, and an Attorney General opinion says a voucher would violate it. For deaf children, that leaves a two-path system: the department's neighborhood school, or the department's school in Honolulu. There is no third door.

Questions Hawaii is positioned to answer

1. How many of the fifteen educational interpreter positions are filled today, on which islands, and how are students served where they are not?
2. Which regular schools have a program for deaf and hard of hearing students, as the school's admissions page describes?
3. How many students with hearing impairment attend school on each island?
4. Will the Board of Education adopt a qualification standard for educational interpreters?
5. Will the Legislature fund an interpreter training program in 2027?
6. What does Board Policy 900-5, Rights of Students who are Deaf, Hard-of-hearing, or Deaf-blind, require, and how is it monitored?
7. Why has enrollment at the school fallen by a fifth since 2019-20?

Go back to the boy from Kahului. Hawaii built him a path that works: a bilingual school, a free dormitory, a seat on a plane every Sunday. It is a path for one child at a time, and it only exists because the alternative at home was so thin. For the deaf children who stay on Maui, Kauai or the Big Island, the state's own access board has published the arithmetic: three interpreters, eighty-one children, twelve credentialed interpreters in the entire state, no training program and no classroom standard. Hawaii does not need a new study to understand the problem. It wrote the study in 2024. What it has not done is act on it.

The full Hawaii file covers all 57 units, each row with its source link, retrieval date and method, and is available under the Index′s licensing terms. Corrections are welcome and are published with the next version.

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TIPS

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