

HAWAII

How Hawaii Lawmakers Spend More Than \$400,000 Without Accounting for It

The 25 neighbor island legislators get per diems of \$175 during sessions, with no receipts required. They can access the same fund between sessions, but have to explain the expenses.

JULY 21, 2015 • By Nathan Eagle   

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Hawaii taxpayers write a check every year to neighbor island legislators for more than \$400,000 to cover expenses the lawmakers don't have to account for.

The 25 members who represent Kauai, Maui and the Big Island automatically receive \$175 per day to be used primarily for food and lodging while the Legislature is in session from January to May. They are not required to keep receipts — it's more of an honor system, similar to what some private companies do.

They can also request the same per diems during the interim, but are required to fill out a form explaining why the money is needed. Civil Beat inspected those expenses for the period ending June 30.

Cory Lum/Civil Beat



Rep. Kaniela Ing has used his per diem during the interim between sessions more than any of his neighbor island colleagues.

The \$175 per day may sound insignificant to some, but it adds up. The roughly 105 days that neighbor island lawmakers get the automatic per diems during session comes out to about \$270,900 for the 17 representatives and roughly \$144,000 for the eight senators.

“Basically, the idea is that a member would have to maintain a residence on Oahu during the session, so they would need funding for every day” during session, House Chief Clerk Brian Takeshita said.

Some members may rent an apartment in Honolulu, for instance. Others may stay in a hotel and then go home on weekends.

Per diems are in addition to legislative salaries and travel

The per diem also covers incidental expenses, but not travel. There’s a separate fund for that.

allowances.

Neighbor island lawmakers in the House get an additional \$1,200 per month for travel to and from Oahu. Senators get one round-trip flight per week plus two additional round-trips per month during session and one additional round-trip per month for non-Oahu senators representing more than one island.

A non-Oahu Senate president such as Ron Kouchi, who represents Kauai and Niihau — is authorized eight round-trip flights per month.

The per diem also comes on top of their \$59,000 annual salaries and [\\$13,000 legislative allowances](#). Lawmakers have to account for how they use their allowances, which can be for such expenses as office furniture, staff meals and mailing newsletters to constituents.

“Per diem expenditures are not itemized like legislative allowance — members get the \$175 per overnight, and they are not required to submit substantiation for what they spend it on,” Takeshita said. “This is a common practice among both government and private sector organizations when employees travel.”

Most neighbor island lawmakers received \$18,375 for the 105 days between the start of the legislative session and sine die. Some received slightly less because there’s a five-day recess during session in which some lawmakers took the per diem and others did not.

Some Extra Cash Between Sessions

Then there are the additional per diems they can request between sessions. Rep. Kaniela Ing has requested interim per diems far more than his neighbor island colleagues. He asked for it 25 times from the end of session May 7 through June 30, for a total of \$4,375.

That’s more than his fellow Maui lawmakers. House Speaker Joe Souki took per diems 10 times during the same period and Reps. Angus McKelvey and Justin Woodson took them just twice.

Ing could not be reached for comment Friday or Monday.

A review of Ing's interim per diem authorization forms shows he requested the funds when he was on Oahu for a staff mahalo lunch, strategic meetings for next session and attending the University of Hawaii law school graduation, and accomplishing work at his Capitol office such as responding to constituent emails and phone calls, preparing for a town hall meeting in Kihei and working on an end-of-session mailer to constituents, among other reasons.

Ing's explanations on his official request forms were more detailed than those of his colleagues.

Souki, for instance, routinely says on his forms that the purpose is "legislative business, appointments, meet with staff, office mail." Only one of his requests to take a per diem included additional information. That was in early May when he noted that the money was for a Military Appreciation Month celebration and a meeting with the Lao Middle School band.



Rep. James Tokioka rarely takes per diems during the interim.

Other lawmakers rarely if ever use their per diems during interims.

Kauai Reps. Jimmy Tokioka, Derek Kawakami and Dee Morikawa didn't use theirs once from the end of session and June 30. Neither did Big Island Rep. Richard Creagan.

"Just because we have the ability to use it doesn't mean we should," Tokioka said.

He was on Oahu on Friday to help get his new office manager set up, but said he wasn't going to ask for the \$175 he could get for the visit.

Tokioka said he mostly uses the per diem during session to cover meals and hotel stays. Some years he said he's been lucky enough to find a furnished apartment with a six-month lease, which cuts down on the cost.

"Sometimes when we have caucuses there's a need to get reimbursed," he said. "But I don't even look at what the other guys do. I just try to save the state as much money as I can."

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John Bond



Very interesting article Nathan.

Like · Reply · 2 · Jul 21, 2015 3:34am



Robert C. La Mont

The whole idea of a per diem is that it is a reasonable sum and it would not be worth the bother to collect and count receipts. If you have to cover lodging, \$175 is pretty reasonable.

Like · Reply · 5 · Jul 21, 2015 4:21am



Pat Tompkins

Reasonable? Government pays Unit 13 employees (scientific & professional) far less per diem. Same day travel intra-state is \$20 no matter if you're there 4 hours or 16. Overnight travel is divided into quarter days. Intra-state overnight is \$90/24 hours and includes a lodging allowance of \$50. Out of state overnight travel is \$145/24 hours and includes a lodging allowance of \$85. AND we have to provide receipts and pay for the lodging ourselves and be reimbursed after the fact. Sometimes we're even required to submit a trip report before we can be reimbursed. I think HGEA ought to use the Legislatures own per diem rates as evidence to increase our per diem during the next negotiations.

Like · Reply · Jul 21, 2015 5:36pm



Robert C. La Mont

Pat Tompkins Yes, it does seem like they should get the same rate as other government employees. Still, a \$50 housing allowance is not going to get you much in Honolulu.

Like · Reply · Jul 21, 2015 6:39pm



Rick Tubania · University of Hawaii at Manoa

another issue creating article by cb when there is none. responsible reporting or outright silliness? it appears to be the latter.

Like · Reply · 3 · Jul 21, 2015 11:57am



Drew Doo

any report that shows how our tax money is being spent by our employees is good since most of the "average joes" in Hawaii are too busy trying to pay the bills to research themselves. Let's get more of these types of reports out there so we know just how our tax money is being spent and who is spending it. I, for one, would like to know what I am working 3 1/2 months out of the year for free for. Good article.

Like · Reply · 2 · Jul 21, 2015 12:40pm



Eva Ivy

In my opinion, financial benefits are the reasons why Politicians 'kick, scratch and claw' to win elections; and for years I thought they really cared about representing the people and serving as public servants. Money and Power can turn a decent person into a greedy and conniving one.

Like · Reply · Jul 21, 2015 1:02pm



Russell Ruderman · Senator at Hawaii State Senate

Is it really a financial benefit when an outer island legislator's Oahu housing costs are re-imbursed? Money is indeed a big problem in government. This article does not

touch that big problem; instead it casts a hardworking honest politician in a bad light while ignoring the elephant.

Like · Reply ·  4 · Jul 23, 2015 2:54pm



Elise Anderson · Tutor at Excel Learning Center

"Just because we have the ability to use it doesn't mean we should." Thank you, Tokioka (and CB for reporting!

Like · Reply · Jul 21, 2015 5:19pm



Carolyn Ornellas · Kapaa, Hawaii

The term "Neighbor Islands" is 'Ōahu-centric & passé. Honolulu is home to the Capitol & buildings, but every island is a neighbor island to its neighbors. Like the colors of the rainbow, each island has its own unique qualities while contributing to the overall character of Hawai'i nei. Please show your respect for every island by taking the time to name them individually. Mahalo.

Nice job otherwise.

Like · Reply · Jul 21, 2015 8:49pm



Clifford Kapono

This article is bullshit. Rep. Kaniela Ing is probably one of the most controversial politicians in the legislature so no wonder the good ole boys have targeted him by using one of their political paid bitches to write another lame ass Ciivl Beat article. If you know what's going on you'll smell the rat and the typical State of Confusion method of talking shit about someone who is not on their crony capitalistic team. Everyone gets per diem, every board member, commissioner on every State Board or Commission gets travel, hotel and per diem. That's how it works. But to single out one particular person as if he's a culprit, that's absolutely a witch hunt and classic Hawaii politics at its finest.

Like · Reply ·  2 · Jul 22, 2015 6:36pm



Russell Ruderman · Senator at Hawaii State Senate

The focus of this article is tragic and ironic. Another way of interpreting the data is that Rep. Ing is the hardest working outer island legislator. He is also one of the most honest public servants in the state. Oahu folks may not appreciate the travel costs involved, but they are real and legitimate.

Though harder to discern, the cost to taxpayers of corporate agendas which trump the public interest through direct contributions is many times greater than the legitimate costs of government. Perhaps shedding more light on this issue would be an even greater public service.

Like · Reply ·  7 · Jul 23, 2015 2:50pm



Una Greenaway

Representative Ing is doing a fabulous job of really representing. It takes more time.

Like · Reply ·  2 · Jul 23, 2015 7:32pm

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