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Blood Bank of Hawaii's business of blood

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Over the last eight years, Kim-Anh Nguyen has led Blood Bank of Hawaii, a nonprofit organization that provides blood products to 18 hospitals statewide, as its president and CEO.

Previously, she said she held a more technical role – which prepared her for this one – as the medical director of the Blood Centers of the Pacific and chief medical officer of the Western Region for United Blood Services.

“I’m in a very happy business and mahalo our donors and the community for all they do [to help support us],” she told Pacific Business News. “With more than 25,000 healthy blood donors a year, we can give back so much more to enable local health care workers to continue to tend to the health of our Isle populations.”

The nonprofit’s 2013-2014 annual report reflects a strategic plan and tagline, “more than just blood,” that Nguyen still upholds today – a business model she credits for preparing the organization for the Covid-19 crisis.



EUGENE TANNER | PBN

Kim-Anh Nguyen, CEO of Blood Bank of Hawaii, Tuesday, May 25, 2021, in Honolulu.

Her priorities for the year ahead include reevaluating core operations, adding more testing for safety of platelets, summer blood drive initiatives such as a fundraising partnership with Special Olympics Hawaii, working more closely with labor unions and the state Department of Health, and adapting to donation patterns and diversifying its budget.

“The reason most people don’t donate blood is not because they are afraid of needles, but instead because they don’t get asked. So, we’re asking now,” Nguyen said.

What’s changed most within the organization from when you first started?

When I first started, I wanted to strengthen my relationship with our board and grow as a leader to make the most impact right away. In coming into the organization, I saw we were doing so many things right and provided what hospitals needed, but from a technical standpoint, there were some gaps.

In the last eight years, we brought technology, automation, and mobilization. We focused on nimbleness, and as a team, changed and adapted very quickly.

Priorities [then] were reorienting optics to focus on our hospital customers and recognize the science of medicine had advanced – so we had to, too. Our mission then was more direct-to-consumer to collect blood and save lives, but we pivoted more to business-to-business offering more specialty components.

How has the Covid-19 pandemic impacted financials and fundraising?

We were able to maintain our revenue and cash flow. What contributed to that was relying on board partnerships and securing a PPP loan. Another positive result came in January with the launch of a new, convalescent plasma product initiative, Fight Covid with Covid.

We noticed a shortage, looked at the data to see who was getting hit hardest with Covid infections – two-thirds of which were underrepresented individuals – and focused on them, while forging community and state government partnerships funded by grants.

What were some lessons learned from last year?

One, if we had not laid the foundation of our organization, we would not have been able to make it – our business is preparing for personal disaster – and we were, in a way, ready for this pandemic that nobody saw coming because of the culture we developed beforehand.

Two, we cannot go it alone. We needed the reach of our board to survive this crisis, to quickly learn how to ask for help, and create new community partnerships.

What do you need most now? What is the greatest need for Hawaii's nonprofit community?

Blood Bank of Hawaii is currently at a tipping point.

We have made great strides in the last two years, but are still in need of a new headquarters and want to encourage the community to invest in us and invest in the state's blood supply for the years to come. The new facility is a business investment, not a donation.

For nonprofits to thrive and be sustainable, we must view ourselves as a business first – however, not forget the heart and gut, or the blood, sweat and tears of doing good work.

What keeps you up at night?

Thinking of recruitment and acquisition of talent. We are hiring to add to our team of just over 100 staff, for frontline staff and graduates of a diverse nature. We have a good track-record in job training and setting our employees up with future pathways within the organization.

What advice would you offer to other leaders?

Take risks and put your energy into goals, because although it is hard work, the impact is so clear and positive. Be grateful and thankful for the opportunities and continue to have your eyes open for new ones.

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