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PUBLIC HEALTH

Blood bank to test all of its donations for the Zika virus

By Timothy Hurley
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With the Zika virus a growing worldwide health threat, the Blood Bank of Hawaii is moving to implement screening of all of its blood donations in an effort to ensure a Zika-free supply.

Beginning in September, the blood bank will join a study of a Zika screening assay co-developed by health care corporations Grifols and Hologic Inc. and approved for special testing by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

"This is critically important for the safety and reliability of our blood supply," Dr. Kim-Anh Nguyen, the blood bank's president and CEO, said Wednesday.

In moving to launch universal screening, Nguyen said, the blood bank hopes to avoid the fate of Puerto Rico, whose blood centers in February were told by the FDA to stop collecting blood locally and to import supplies from the U.S. mainland. The order came in response to the discovery of locally transmitted cases of Zika.

The price tag for those six weeks of importing blood,



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Kim-Anh Nguyen:

Testing blood supplies to prevent the spread of the virus "is critically important" for safety, the Blood Bank of Hawaii CEO said

she said, was \$4 million.

"The state of Hawaii cannot bear this financial burden," Nguyen said.

The Zika outbreak began in Brazil last year and has spread rapidly through the Americas and is starting to show up on the U.S. mainland, in places such as Florida.

Please see **ZIKA**, A8

ZIKA

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The World Health Organization declared Zika a global emergency in February. Infection has been linked to miscarriages and microcephaly, a birth defect in which a baby's head is unusually small. The condition can lead to developmental problems.

The virus is transmitted through mosquito bites, sexual contact and, potentially, blood transfusions.

Hawaii, with its tropical and subtropical climate and vulnerability to dengue fever, is considered a high-risk zone for a Zika outbreak.

State health officials say Zika is not currently circulating in Hawaii. The only cases identified in Hawaii have been travel-related, with people infected outside of Hawaii. But the same mosquito that transmits dengue also transmits Zika, so the state is vulnerable, they say.

Nguyen said the Zika epidemic now encompasses the South Pacific, so Hawaii needs to be prepared.

"We know the mosquito is here. We know it's active in

the South Pacific. We know how active travel is to Hawaii. Hawaii is at high risk," she said.

When its Procleix Zika test was approved for special testing by the FDA last month, Hologic and Grifols said some blood banks would use the system to screen blood donated in parts of the country where the virus could be endemic, and that screening could be initiated in other U.S. regions where Zika keeps spreading.

Nguyen said the Blood Bank of Hawaii is one of the few blood centers committed to test 100 percent of its blood supply.

The nonprofit already screens for a dozen or more other blood problems. Nguyen said the cost of the new test is similar to that of the other tests. Whatever the cost, she said, it's better than the alternative — the potential for a blood collection shutdown and the devastation of the local blood supply.

Until the new screen is in place Sept. 6, she said, the blood bank will continue, among other things, to question donors about their po-

tential for Zika exposure. Questions include whether a donor has traveled to possible Zika areas and whether he or she has come into contact with anyone who has traveled to those places.

"Anyone who answers yes to any of those questions, we tell them not to donate," she said.

Even after the new screen is established, the blood bank will continue to ask these questions to help ensure a clean blood supply, she said.

Nguyen said participating in the clinical trial will offer valuable data to researchers trying to better understand the virus and possible prevention strategies.

"This puts Hawaii in the forefront globally," she said.

Donors will notice only minor changes to the blood-donor consent form, and new information will be included in donor education materials.

Nguyen, who said summer continues to be a difficult time for the blood supply, also appealed for donors to come in and "save a life." The blood bank is at 1907 Young St., Ewa of McCully Street.