As broadband access grows, so must cybersecurity vigilance

By Al Ogata

ISLAND VOICES

Al Ogata is CEO of CyberHawaii, a nonprofit committed to developing Hawaii's cybersecurity capabilities to better manage and mitigate cyber risks.

According to the FBI, Hawaii now ranks 14th in the nation for per-capita losses from online scams, with residents losing $55 million last year — including more than $18 million lost by kupuna age 60 and over. It's a sobering reminder that our state's aloha is too often exploited by criminals who specialize in deception.

Exposure to online risks intensifies during the holiday season when we shop, donate to charitable causes, and communicate with loved ones. Online schemes are increasingly sophisticated, emotionally manipulative, and are becoming harder to spot.

At the same time, more residents than ever are connecting to the internet. As the state's Connect Kakou initiative expands digital access across our islands, we are helping those of all ages, from keiki to kupuna gain the skills needed to securely navigate today's digital world with confidence. Overseen by Lt. Gov. Sylvia Luke, Connect Kakou is a state of Hawaii program that uses federal funds to build critical infrastructure and enhance digital literacy in communities statewide. These initiatives are essential to ensuring that everyone has the knowledge and protections to stay safe, especially during seasons when scams peak.

Holiday scams hit close to home

Some of the most common include fake disaster-relief charities, imposter crowdfunding campaigns, phishing texts posing as delivery updates, "can't-miss" shopping deals that never arrive, and increasingly, fraudulent investment pitches involving cryptocurrency or digital wallets. These tactics mirror the broader methods used by scammers nationwide posing as charitable organizations: fake websites, cloned donation pages, spoofed phone numbers, high-pressure emotional appeals, and requests for payment through untraceable methods like gift cards, crypto, or wire transfers. And with AI now mainstream, scams are becoming more sophisticated by the day.

Scammers are professionals who are skilled at exploiting moments of urgency, community compassion, or crises.

Strengthening digital community

Cybersecurity must grow side-by-side with broadband access. As digital opportunities expand, so does the need for education; not just for experts, but for everyone who is online — families, kupuna, and keiki.

Recognizing this important gap, organizations are stepping up with new programs designed to build real-world digital skills and confidence. The Moloka'i Digital Hub is creating a community-centered space for learning. Digital Navigator Programs are giving residents one-on-one tech support at their local libraries. And Tech Savvy Teens is empowering local youth to teach neighbors and family members how to navigate the online world safely and confidently with aloha. CyberHawaii is enhancing Hawaii's cybersecurity capabilities and developing the next generation of situationally aware leaders.

These are just a few examples of the work being done across the islands underscoring an important truth: cybersecurity is not just a technical issue. It's a community issue. It's about protecting our people, our resources, and our sense of trust, both online and off.

Cybersecurity is an act of aloha

Practicing caution before donating, double-checking on suspicious messages, using secure payment methods, teaching kupuna how to spot red flags, and reporting scams when they happen are ways we can care for each other. These small steps create a safer digital environment for every household in Hawaii and help ensure that hard earned money and personal data is protected.

If you are a victim of a scam, it is important to report it and seek help. Do not be ashamed. Reporting the scam also prevents others becoming a victim. It is another way to show our aloha for others.

In this season of giving, let's look out for one another on and offline. Together, we can build a more connected and more protected Hawaii.

REPORT SCAMS: *If you suspect you've been scammed, contact your bank or credit card issuer immediately. Report scams to the FBI Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3.gov), FTC (877) 382-4357, and the Hawaii Office of Consumer Protection (808) 586-2630.*

This was co-signed by Lt. Gov. Sylvia Luke, who oversees the state's Connect Kakou program.