



The Senate Ka 'Aha Kenekoa

STATE CAPITOL
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96813

Senate President Ronald D. Kouchi
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Before offering my remarks, I want to offer an observation. All of the news reports talk about the daunting task ahead of us and the difficulty in dealing with the terrible tragedy that occurred on Maui. I was curious as to how would we respond—what would our attitude be. But as I watched the members warmly greeting each other, posing for pictures, you're clearly ready to go to work. You are clearly ready to do the job that you were all elected to do, and in watching the body language and the camaraderie, you give me great hope and optimism about what we will be able to accomplish in the upcoming session.

We are two days removed from the birthday of Martin Luther King, so I'd like to open with a quote from Dr. King and hopefully close with another quote. From his Sermon on the Mount, he said, "All life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality. . . . Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly. We are made to live together because of the interrelated structure of reality." I cannot think of more timely words as we proceed to assist our family in Maui. While not all of us are from Maui, each and every one of us has been deeply affected by what happened on Maui. We all know people, we have visited, and we know the devastation and the loss of life and how difficult this is going to be to go forward, but you need to take that first step. So, clearly, fire mitigation is going to be at the top of our list, and stewardship and management of the lands in Maui, but as we go forward, we want to ensure that it doesn't happen on any other island, and so the stewardship and land management, fire mitigation must be done in each of our islands to ensure the safety of each of our residents and their property.

There is great detail—so I won't go into it—in the news today about the housing shortage, the cost, and the stressed market in Maui, and, clearly, to get reasonable housing choices for the displaced residents, to make sure that there are choices for those who are not displaced but affected by the shortage of units that were lost, is going to be at the top of our list. But that housing shortage exists across the state, and as you talk to employers, clearly, the lack of affordable housing is the biggest impediment in recruiting or retaining employees. In my own district, the superintendent of schools for the Kaua'i district reports having offered, last school year, 28 new teachers positions on Kaua'i that they accepted. Before they could begin, all 28 turned the positions down because they could not find housing that they could afford on the paychecks that they were getting as individual employees, and that is something that is

happening across the state. And so, while we are going to work to assist Maui, we want to let the rest of the state know that we understand that we have a commitment across the state.

Before the Maui fires, a lot was made about the ALICE population and how do we help them. One of the cornerstones that we looked at was striving to achieve universal pre-K. I am glad to report that it's almost a year ago that the lieutenant governor held a press conference and explained the plan that she had. Last week, she reported she is ahead of schedule in getting classroom seats available. There is no argument that if you go to preschool, you have better educational outcomes during your K–12 years, so we are trying to create a more level playing field for every child in the state to have a good foundation to make sure that they can maximize their educational opportunities. But in particular to the ALICE families, it costs anywhere from \$1,500 to \$1,800 a month for child care, and if we can create the opportunity to have that child in pre-K, where they're getting the educational foundation and the parents can be at ease, knowing that their children are in safe spaces, learning, and they will not have to pay the monthly childcare bill, it is, again, how we are interrelated—how it all ties in, how it works. And so, to the lieutenant governor: Thank you for the work you have done, but, more importantly, for the work that you are going to continue doing.

This is particularly important to me, and I want to talk about some happy things, too; I don't want to seem depressing. For the first time, before I came down to the session, I had the opportunity to FaceTime with my grandson on Kaua'i. For the first time since 2011, my wife's not here because she has decided to be a full-time babysitter, so this issue about child care, how much it costs, and choices that parents are making, are very real to me. And I also realize how fortunate our family is to be in the position for my wife to make that choice, and I know how many families, everybody has to be at work so that you are able to meet your obligations and to try to prepare for the future that you hope for your child and your grandchild, and so you can count on me as someone who is living through this experience today to be at your side as we go forward.

Senator Kidani, as our Education chair, has worked tirelessly to make sure that we have an education system that will allow our children to compete with anybody in the world, but the other part about how we get to the interrelated is the push with Senator Kidani on the education side and Senator Dela Cruz in Ways and Means, Senator Gabbard with ag is to get the schools to buy more local products to put on the plates. It is clear: With better nutrition, you get better outcomes. On Kaua'i, we have 15 school principals with 15 cafeteria managers with a complex area superintendent. We're all committed to that. Two state hospitals that presently have 60 percent of the food on their plates locally sourced, and so we are launching on Kaua'i this Farm to School program for a whole school district. It has gone school by school, and we're hoping to create a model and a template going forward, but, again, how do we address food security? Well, that's by growing more. How do you create more activity from the farmers? They need a market, and the DOE feeds a hundred thousand people a day: largest restaurant in Hawai'i. If we can get the DOE to get half of their plate locally sourced, we are going to move the needle in a huge way for our agricultural community, and we're going to have much better outcomes for our students. I look forward to continuing the partnership with Senator Kidani, Senator Gabbard, Senator Dela Cruz, and the rest of the Senate as we move forward.

What is the best fire mitigation program we can have? Well, that would be having the land in active use. The problem is, as the plantations have closed, too much of the land has gone fallow and is dry. I'm happy to report that on Kaua'i, they are going to put 3,000 acres of land in West Kaua'i into sunflower. The sunflowers will be harvested and brought to the mill area (the old mill at Kaumakani), and Hawai'i Pacific Biodiesel will be crushing the sunflower, and they will use the oil for a renewable energy fuel for the generators at KIUC. Normally, you'd have to take the residue after you've crushed the sunflower and pay to dispose of it. Well, that residue is something that we can use to feed cattle, so as we grow the cattle industry, now, all of a sudden, besides the oil for fuel, then the residue is available to use for feeding cattle, and we have, I think, a much better ecosystem as we are ramping up.

Senator Dela Cruz, over the last several years, has made it a point, when we've done visits to the different islands, jurisdictions here on O'ahu, to have affected department heads present, to have county officials present, private-sector people present. The effectiveness has gone up 200 percent, and you have different decision-makers in the room, but they're not in their silos protecting their turf. Everybody is there in the room trying to figure out how to do it. December 28th, he and I met with Frank VanderSloot and Dexter Kishida (the deputy director of ag), and talked about where we could use some of the local beef. Within less than a month, Dexter, in contact with Superintendent Hayashi, has a much larger purchase of local beef for the DOE, and that was in a matter of weeks that we got that done. It's this kind of collaboration and being interconnected that is going to make us successful as we go forward.

All the good food, the handshakes, and everything are waiting upstairs. I think the press has covered to death the hard job that we have ahead of us, and I think I've said enough for this morning and would like you to get to the festivities, but I would simply close with another quote from Dr. Martin Luther King. To my colleagues: "We are now faced with the fact that tomorrow is today. We are confronted with the fierce urgency of now." So I will shut up, and let's go and fiercely tackle the problems ahead of us. Thank you.