



# The Senate

## Ka 'Aha Kenekoa

STATE CAPITOL  
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96813

Senate President Ronald D. Kouchi  
Opening Day Remarks  
33rd Legislature  
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This is the time for my remarks, so: aloha. I realized, thinking about today, that this will be the 10th full session that I will be presiding over, and I would like to begin by thanking my colleagues for giving me this opportunity—to you for placing your trust in me—and I want you to know how much I appreciate and value the relationships that we enjoy and the relationships that allow me to be here.

And, as I have done every year, before talking about anything else, I take seriously my responsibility on speaking on behalf of the Senate to thank each and every one of you, especially those who are seated here on the floor: the family members who have sacrificed so that we may serve, the campaign people who have worked so hard to allow us to get elected to be able to serve. There are no words to really express just how much we appreciate your willingness to share your family member with us for those of you who have given up so much of your time and put in so much energy to helping us get here. On behalf of all of the Senate members, thank you very much.

So, I have to my left my wife, Joy, who has done that sacrifice; to my right, our eldest son, Dan; to my left behind me, our youngest son, Egan. And before I continue talking about people on the rostrum with me, we have recently produced the goals of the Senate, of the Majority. And we have not yet gotten them put into a booklet, but soon it will be out and available, and we are here to tell you that insurance is a big problem facing our community, but as it's been highlighted by the fires in California and the hurricanes in Florida and North Carolina, this is a national problem, and it may take us working with the federal government to come up with a solution so that we can afford to ensure our homes protect our investments and continue to choose to live in a beautiful place like Hawai'i and not get insurance premiums that are so high that we can no longer choose to live here. So, we are acutely aware of that, and Senator Keohokalole has been working or leading the Senate's efforts in the interim working group that has been doing this. And through his committee, we will be carrying the discussion to look for solutions. In his committee, we'll continue to work on issues to ensure that Hawaiian Electric is able to deliver power to all of our communities on O'ahu, Maui County, and Hawai'i Island. I left Kaua'i out because we are run by a cooperative, and we're the only island in the chain not getting our power through Hawaiian Electric, but it's critically important that everyone get the power so that we have the economic development and the quality of life that we enjoy here.

Education is going to be the key if we are going to create a better path for each of our children. We in the Senate are committed to continue to work with the administration, and the governor has put Lieutenant Governor Luke on point for getting those seats for universal pre-K at no charge to everyone in the state of Hawai‘i. It is expensive to pay for child care, and it is clear that if you go to pre-K as a K–12 student, you have better educational outcomes. And so we are committed to do that; we are committed on the K–12 program. Senator Kidani has been a long and passionate advocate for education, and Senator Dela Cruz, as he’s led the Ways and Means committee, visiting each of the islands, has made it clear that the days when we had academies because we wanted to create opportunities for students that were passionate about different things and got a certificate on the wall was not the goal anymore. The goal is to go from internships to apprenticeships: to have these students in the academies working in the area that they’re interested in, maybe pursuing a career in later, so that when they are done, it’s not the paper on the wall that matters, it’s the job that they have or the ability to have prepared them to go to college. And he has been driving this message and changing the paradigm, and I think it’s a real game-changer about preparing our children to face the future and to wind up with jobs that pay better and to be able to better support their families.

He has also been an advocate for purchasing vacant land, and as you see the debates about what would be good, what would be bad, oftentimes the developer has to maximize their investment, and they need that land to pay the highest and best use, but not if we own the land and we’re the State of Hawai‘i. And a lot of the land that he has land banked initially was in his passion to drive the ag economy, but we are now seeing that if we control land, then if we’re going to do development for affordable housing, that that is critically important. And as there is a transition occurring on Kaua‘i as Steve Case has now looked at the Grove Farm properties and said, “I believe that we would like to sell some of this land to see what’s happening in the community,” I believe it’s important for the Agribusiness Development Corporation to take possession of some of these lands that Grove Farm has: lands that control how the water flows so we can ensure a future in farming for all of the adjacent landowners. They have land that would be great for us to build housing, and there is land where we could relocate our prison out of Wailua, where they’re in a tsunami-inundation zone, and we need to look at all of the opportunities that exist on each of the islands. And with Senator Dela Cruz’s track record, I am confident that the Ways and Means committee will work with the rest of the Senate to come up with a plan that will create pathways to create that brighter future that we are all looking for.

We have Senator San Buenaventura in the health space. Health cost is just skyrocketing. And she’s from Puna on the Big Island, and for those of us who live in rural O‘ahu or the neighbor islands, having qualified health care is a challenge. I found out on Kaua‘i last month: I had right trigger-finger issues, but they have a tremendous hand surgeon, so I had same-day surgery done at Wilcox Hospital, and a month later, I can grab the gavel with my right hand again. You know, I am so glad I was able to rehabilitate at home, where we’ve constructed an ADA-style shower so that you could keep your incision dry and be safe. And I had cataract issues, and there’s a doctor on Kaua‘i who had a Manhattan practice who decided that wasn’t the life and the way she wanted to raise her three children, and she’s on Kaua‘i now. It took me five months to get to see her because we have so many of us aging and needing the assistance, but I am troubled this morning because the right eye was done for distance, so I can see you better now, but if I need to

actually read, I'm going to have to put my glasses on because I still can't see near. But to have someone like that on Kaua'i available to us, you know, is amazing, but that's a unique part of the story and not the common story for each of us. So, healthcare: critically important to us, and with Senator San Buenaventura's leadership, I'm excited about what's going to happen.

Senator Chang has been in the paper recently about the housing initiatives. Senator Moriwaki, as the Ways and Means vice chair, making the investment in the capital improvement projects. You know, we're excited about what we're going to do. And I see Governor Ige here, and so I will share with you what I told the current governor: He's the luckiest guy I know because we put so much money into housing with Governor Ige, but by the time you go through the planning, you get the permits, you put the things out to bid and everything, all Governor Green is going to be doing is wearing hard hats and using shovels. And then I guess he got upset when I was trying to give Governor Ige all the credit, so he put more money in this year's budget for affordable housing, but that says we're committed to get the affordable housing.

And I wanted to use a Martin Luther King quote—I gave it to one of my office people last night, and I said, "Type this in big font so I didn't have to put my glasses back on." I can't find it here, and it's on my phone, and I don't want to pull out my phone, and I don't want to put on my glasses, and I don't want to try to make the screenshot bigger, so I'll paraphrase Dr. Martin Luther King since we are on the eve of celebrating his birthday. But the essence of one of his speeches said that everything is interconnected in this world, and everything that each and every one of us does affects and interacts with everything else around us. Now, we have a shortage of teachers, but one of the biggest obstacles to getting a teacher is that the housing is too expensive. We have a shortage of medical professionals, nurses. The shortage of housing is an obstacle. In any business, it is an obstacle. I'm thrilled to be standing before you with one son who lives on O'ahu, 20 minutes away from Kaua'i, and the other one 5 minutes away from where we live on Kaua'i. But I know there's a lot of you out there who are still fighting to get your children home or your grandchildren home, and the obstacle is the housing, but that's why we need the investment in the infrastructure. We need to get through the permitting process and build the units faster because this housing affects everything we're trying to do in this economy—everything in what we're trying to do in creating a better life for all of us here in Hawai'i.

The other interconnectedness that I'd like to talk about is agriculture. Now, they're saying climate change and other issues are affecting some of the disasters we see. But on the wildfire front, there weren't a lot of wildfires when we were growing cane and we had active crops in the ground. And in fact, ironically, there were managed burns by the plantation as they harvested the cane. But with the closing of sugar and so much fallow land, then we have areas that are ripe for the fires that we see. There was a fire on West Kaua'i that started from Hanapēpē Hawaiian Homes and was working its way west to Kaumakani Village. I was out with Bruce Robinson looking at Gay and Robinson land, and you could see the area that burned, and on the dirt road that we stood on, on one side was the black charred ground from the fire. And on the other side, Alec Sou was growing crops, and it was untouched, and it stopped the fire, and it protected Kaumakani Village. Senator Hirono got the money for Pacific Biodiesel to start raising sunflower on Gay and Robinson property: crush the sunflower seeds to get oil for Kaua'i Island Utility Cooperative to run the generators with a renewable fuel; the leftover crushed seeds are

nutrient-rich for cattle, which Gay and Robinson raises. And that fire break is there to protect the village of Kaumakani, Makaweli, ultimately to Waimea itself.

So how do we get more of our crops or our land into active use? Well, I begin by saying that not making the 10 percent goal of locally sourced food for our schools is not going to get us there. But in the interconnectedness of this world, if we are at the public schools that serve a hundred thousand meals a day, buying more local produce from our farmers here that they would be putting more of their agricultural land into cultivation, shouldn't we be spending millions of dollars to do that instead of the report we just got from the AG and spending millions of dollars to put up walls and barriers to protect us from fire? Why not something that would feed our children? And then in the interconnectedness, it shows clearly that if a student has better nutrition, they have better scores. So now, we go from protecting against fire but feeding children, giving them more nutritious meals. There may be an identified cost at the point of the cafeteria purchase that the school lunch costs more, but we need to look beyond just one comparison on making a decision, but we need to look at the bigger picture about how is our money being used and how are we effectively going to deliver for all of the people of Hawai'i? Now, most of the food is frozen and preservatives and in freezers. If we start using fresh food, refrigeration costs less electricity than freezers cost. Many of the students we have—that may be probably the best meal they're going to have because they're challenged in getting food on the table at home, paying rent, making ends meet. So wouldn't we want that to be a great meal for them? But I say to the Department of Education, if you better understand your role in all of this, and to the Department of Agriculture, why this is so critical for us to expand, then, hopefully, we will be telling each other how we can do it and not why we can't do it. And we're not going to be counting bottled water as part of the 5 percent of locally sourced products for our students.

But you can read all of our stuff later. And this is the least pressure I've felt on any Opening Day remarks that I've made because everybody's going to want to write about what Speaker Nakamura said because she's the first woman to be the speaker of the House here in Hawai'i, unlike the progressive Senate, which has had President Colleen Hanabusa and President Donna Kim, you know. So, to my colleague from Kaua'i, I extend my congratulations to you.

And there are a few things I'd like to do before I wrap up, so I'm going to need your help. Liliana is 12 today, and Mike Gabbard is 77 today, but it shows that as we are moving to the twilight, we have people coming with the sunrise. So if you would join me—and I think it would be easier to say, "Happy birthday, Lily and Mike"—but somebody that's a better singer than I, can we join in singing "Happy Birthday" to Lily and to Mike?

And while I'm not 77 but a decade behind, I'm honored today. I have several of my classmates who are here from Waimea High School. We're celebrating our 50th reunion this year. Governor Ige is also a class of 1975. Unfortunately, he went to Pearl City and not Waimea High School.

You know, we talk a lot in the past as we're celebrating the 50th anniversary of Title IX and the impact that Congresswoman Mink had on the lives of so many young women in this country. Well, Liliana's mother, Rachel, went to Pepperdine on a golf scholarship after graduating from Kaua'i High School. And we on Kaua'i were blessed because she chose to come home, meet her

husband, raise her family here on Kaua‘i. And with her is her daughter Carly, who’s a senior in high school at Kaua‘i High School this year, and she will be going to Oregon to a small school, and she will be playing soccer. And so the opportunities that were created for the young women here continue to be reaped by our young girls in our high schools here, and so, although she’s not here, how about again another big hand for some of the effects of Congresswoman Mink?

Now, I’m going to brag a little bit about my daughter-in-law, staying on the women’s team. You know, neither one of them chose to be here because they know I have a tendency to embarrass them when they’re here, but our eldest son, Dan, his wife, Katie, was in communications for the Department of Health, and she was the face of the Department of Health during Red Hill and a strong advocate for the community here on O‘ahu and the protection of the aquifer and the water resource for the people of Hawai‘i. She works full-time in a private communications firm now but decided a year and a half ago to go to the Richardson School of Law, so, while working full-time, she is doing the four-year night law school program and wants to be an even more fierce advocate than she already was, and my wife and I are incredibly proud of what both Dan and Katie have achieved.

And my son Egan—I don’t want to tell Dan he’s my favorite even though he’s younger, and I only tease because we do have a grandson from Egan—but his wife, who lived in Hawai‘i Kai and did Teach for America, drove from Hawai‘i Kai to Wai‘anae High School almost every day. She did try briefly to find a few young teachers and see if they could get their rent together and live a little closer, and it just didn’t work out, and she went back home to be with her parents. There has been in the past criticism of Teach for America because we train them, and after three years, they run away. When we talk about the problems happening on the Leeward Coast, and we talk about bringing more law enforcement and bringing a presence in that way, how about looking at some love? How about looking at investing in that? And instead of leaving after three years at Wai‘anae High School, she chose to stay two more years. She would score keep or keep statistics for the football team; she would be involved in other after-school activities. For the Wai‘anae people, if you want anybody to blame, look no further than my son Egan, who convinced her to move to Kaua‘i and invest in the students of Kaua‘i and be with him there. But, before she moved, he put on his dress shirt, he put on his tie—he chaperoned the prom at Wai‘anae. Senator Kidani, with one of her staff members, Danicia, who is a former Cherry Blossom queen, worked with West O‘ahu University, and they worked with the young ladies at Wai‘anae to get them dressed, worked with the makeup, hairstylists for them to go to the prom. Why? Because we care about those students—their lives matter. But that’s the way that we move change.

My wife has several cousins here, but one of them, one of her cousins—her daughter went to Kamehameha and eventually got her medical degree from Burns School of Medicine. She was supposed to be here today, but she couldn’t juggle her patients’ schedule. And, realizing that her patients’ needs would not be met, she chose to go to work at Waianae Comprehensive, where she is hanging her shingle, not here downtown. Ray Vara, I’m not saying you should go steal her for Kapi‘olani or Straub (she’s doing great work out at Waianae Comprehensive), but it’s the young people who are making these choices to invest in the young people on the Leeward Coast that I believe is going to help turn us around and all get us going in the right direction.

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So, I'd simply end with another Martin Luther King quote: "Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that." So, let us lead with love; let us lead with aloha. Mahalo.