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LATE TESTIMONY

STATE OF HAWAII
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
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February 5, 2008

MEMORANDUM

TO: Honorable Jerry L. Chang, Chair
House Committee on Higher Education

FROM: Lillian B. Koller, Director

SUBJECT: H.B. 2043, H.D.1 - RELATING TO HIGHER EDUCATION BOARD
ALLOWANCE FOR FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

Hearing: February 5, 2008, Tuesday, 2:00 p.m.
Conference Room 309, State Capitol

PURPOSE: The purpose of H. B. 2043, H. D. 1, is to expand the opportunity for former foster youth to pursue and complete post-secondary education, by increasing the length of the time to apply for a higher education board allowance and extending the maximum benefit length from 48 months to 60 months.

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: The Department strongly supports H.B. 2043, H.D. 1, because expanding post-secondary opportunities for former foster youth will enhance the likelihood that former foster youth will obtain an appropriate post-secondary education and make successful transitions to self-sufficiency.

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AGENCY

The amendments in H.D.1 is consistent with the amendments proposed in H.B. 1356, H.D. 2, S.D. 2, an Administration bill submitted last session.

The changes being proposed in this bill are: 1) amending the definition to also include youth who were under the placement responsibility of the Department when a legally responsible caregiver was granted custody; 2) increasing the time limit to apply for a higher education board allowance from one year following high school graduation through the age of 21; 3) providing former foster youth who are between the ages of 22 and 26 years on July 1, 2008, and who are already attending an institution of higher education, the opportunity to apply for a higher education board allowance within a year; 4) increasing the maximum age for the benefit from 21 years to 26 years; and 5) extending the maximum benefit length from 48 months to 60 months.

These changes will allow the Department to provide needed support for a former foster youth's education and successful transition to self-sufficiency. The increase in both the length of the time to apply for this benefit and the length of the benefit itself will allow more youth to complete a post-secondary education. This bill will increase chances of full-time and higher paid employment and decrease the need for other financial assistance to the former foster youth as an adult or a return to child welfare services.

Many national studies have shown that an individual's level of education is one of the most consistent indicators of the potential to obtain and maintain employment. The potential for self-sufficiency and earning potential increases with the attainment of post-secondary education.

Studies have shown that during the past several years, the traditional four year college education has been taking five or more years to complete. The reasons for this increase include: the limited availability of classes to meet the demand, and the need for youth to pursue a non-traditional approach due to the limited finances and the need to maintain employment in addition to attending classes. Additionally, many former foster youth begin their post-secondary education at local community colleges and then transfer to other four year schools. This often means that it will take longer for them to complete their education. We are also finding that the program's upper age limit of 21 years often requires terminating the benefit before the youth has completed his or her post-secondary education. Without this support, many are forced to withdraw and cannot complete their education.

When similar studies have focused on the outcomes for youth aging out of the foster care system, it has been shown that a higher percentage of former foster youth than the general population do not complete post-secondary educational or vocational training programs and are therefore subsequently unemployed or under-employed, homeless, and the recipients of

general public assistance and other social welfare benefits. One of the factors leading to these negative outcomes is the lack of post-secondary education.

The Department has found that the number of former foster youth participating in the higher education program has dramatically increased over the past several years, from approximately 30 participants in State Fiscal Year (SFY) 1998 to approximately 210 in SFY 2007. This trend in the increasing number of former foster youth pursuing post-secondary education is due to aggressive outreach efforts by the Department and its partners, including the Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition, purchase of service contracted independent living service providers, the Hawaii Foster Parent Association, the Family Court's Project Ho'Kahua, and the Heart Gallery Hawaii. In addition, the Department has made information available on the Department's website about our independent living and higher education programs.

The changes proposed in this bill will enable more youth to take advantage of this benefit and complete their course of study. The anticipated results from enactment of this bill include an increase in youth's employability and ability to be a self-sufficient, contributing member of our community with a decrease in the likelihood of the former foster youth becoming dependant on financial or medical assistance.

We want to point out that in addition to higher education benefits to help support a youth's transition to successful self-

sufficiency, the Department provides other services, including continued medical coverage in accordance with Med-QUEST rules, continued participation in the supportive counseling and guidance provided through the independent living service providers, and advocacy and mentoring from the Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition. The Department is also committed to connecting our young people with enduring family connections for life as they exit from foster care.

These changes represents a very small contribution from the State for an investment in our most precious resource - our youth. Through this investment, we have the opportunity to improve the future outcomes for our keiki and our communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important measure. We respectfully request your expeditious and favorable consideration of this proposal.