

HAWAII YOUTH SERVICES NETWORK

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Joseph Fichter, President

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Adolescent Services Program, Kaiser
Permanente Medical Care System

American Civil Liberties Union of Hawaii

Bay Clinic, Inc.

Big Brothers Big Sisters of Honolulu

Big Island Substance Abuse Council

Blueprint for Change

Bobby Benson Center

Boys and Girls Club of the Big Island

Catholic Charities Hawaii

Child and Family Service

Coalition for a Drug Free Hawaii

Domestic Violence Clearinghouse
and Legal Hotline

EPIC, Inc.

Family Support Services of West Hawaii

Foster Family Programs of Hawaii

Hale Kipa, Inc.

Hale 'Opio Kauai, Inc.

Hawaii Behavioral Health

Hawaii Island YWCA

Hawaii Foster Parent Association

Healthy Mothers Healthy Babies Coalition

Hina Mauka Teen Care

John Howard Association

Kahi Mohala Hospital

Kahuku United Methodist Church

Kama'aina Kids, Inc.

Kids Behavioral Health

Kids Hurt Too

KMC Teen Intervention Program

Life Foundation

Marimed Foundation

The Maui Farm, Inc.

Maui Youth and Family Services

Palama Settlement

Parents and Children Together (PACT)

Queen's Medical Center, Family
Treatment Center

Rainbow House

Salvation Army Family Intervention Services

Salvation Army Family Treatment Services

Sex Abuse Treatment Center

Sisters Offering Support

Susannah Wesley Community Center

Surfing the Nations

The Center

Turning Point for Families

Waikiki Health Center

Women Helping Women

World Healing Institute

YWCA of Kauai

1/31/08
January 27, 2008

To: Senator Suzanne Chun Oakland
And members of the Committee on Human Services and Housing

Testimony in Support of SB 2246 Relating to Higher Education Board Allowance for Former Foster Youth

Hawaii Youth Services Network, a statewide coalition of more than 50 youth serving organizations, supports SB2246 Relating to Higher Education Board Allowance for Former Foster Youth.

Each year, about 100 young people age out of the foster care system and have a one-year window of opportunity to apply for higher education board payments and through age twenty-one to complete college or vocational training.

Some youth are not ready to move on to college immediately following high school or have not graduated by age 19. Others are not informed by their case workers or foster families about the availability of these benefits. They need additional time to apply.

Youth seeking a four-year college degree often need more than four years to complete the degree requirements, especially if they are employed at the same time. University of Hawaii statistics show that the average time needed to obtain a bachelor's degree is 5.5 years at present. They need additional time to complete their degree programs.

Without higher education assistance, former foster youth face a bleak future. Up to 30% of youth exiting foster care become homeless before age 21 because they lack the skills to obtain a living wage. In a national study of former foster youth aged 18 - 24, only 48% had completed high school. Two to four years after they left the system, only 38% had stayed employed and 48% had held a full-time job. We need to help our foster youth to gain the education that will enable them to become productive, contributing adults.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Judith F. Clark, MPH
Executive Director

1/31/08



E-Mail: testimony@Capitol.hawaii.gov
Regarding: Senate HSP Hearing
Hearing on: January 31, 2008 @ 1:30 p.m. in room 016

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Date: January 25, 2008
To: Senate Committee on Human Services & Public Housing
Honorable Suzanne Chun Oakland, Chair
Honorable Les Ihara, Jr., Vice Chair
From: Kelly M. Rosati, JD
Executive Director, Hawaii Family Forum
Re: **Strong Support for SB 2246** Relating to Higher Education Board Allowance for Former Foster Youth

Honorable Chair and members of the Senate Committee on Human Services & Public Housing, I am Kelly Rosati representing Hawaii Family Forum (HFF), a non-profit, pro-family education organization committed to preserving and strengthening families in Hawaii.

As many of you know, HFF works on a variety of family issues ranging from domestic violence, affordable housing, homelessness, Darfur divestment, children's access to health care, physician assisted suicide and traditional marriage preservation.

What you may not know is that finding families for Hawaii's legal orphans is also a top policy and direct service priority.

As such, SB 2246 is among our top priorities because its passage will have a profound impact on the ability of Hawaii's legal orphans to be adopted into forever families – for life. Failure to pass this bill will leave in place an unintended but perverse systemic disincentive that prevents older, waiting orphan children from being adopted.

Please allow me to explain.

Hawaii Family Forum and HOPE In the Name of Christ (INC) foster care and adoption agency have a contract with the Department of Human Services to recruit, train, and support adoptive parents for Hawaii's 'difficult to place' foster children.

These are children whose lives have taken a typically tragic path that looks something like the following scenario:

- They've been abused, neglected and/or abandoned by their birth parents, the very people who are supposed to protect them in life from such tragedy
- Their birth parents parental rights had to be terminated so they would have a chance at a safe and happy life

hawaii family forum

- They've been in more foster homes than anyone cares to count for more years than any child should ever endure
- They now live in temporary foster homes, waking up every day knowing that they could move that day and knowing that the family with whom they are living with won't adopt them.

These children are usually older and have special needs and challenging behaviors because of the trauma they have been through in their short lives. During the process of trying to find adoptive families for these minors, we have encountered countless cases where foster parents tell us that they won't adopt the minor in their care because "if we adopt, the child will lose the benefits they get by staying in the system as a foster kid." The primary benefit mentioned: higher education.

The failure to extend the higher education benefits to former foster children who get adopted is a policy literally trapping foster kids in the system. The policy operates like golden handcuffs, preventing too many of our foster kids from achieving the permanency and security of an adoptive family.

Let me tell you about a few of the children whose entire lives and futures are being adversely affected by this unjust policy: (Names are changed to protect confidentiality)

- 12 year old Krystal has been in foster care her whole life. Her foster parents refuse to adopt her, opting instead for guardianship because they don't want her to lose higher education benefits. Instead, she is losing her only chance for a permanent, forever family of her own. If we had adoption parity and the benefits followed into her adoptive family, Krystal would have a family.
- 17 year old Joshua's adoptive parents waited to adopt him until he was 18 so that he wouldn't lose his college benefits
- Social workers told us not to bother trying to find adoptive families for the young teens in their caseloads because they don't want them to lose their college benefits: so instead they lost their opportunity to be adopted

We urge you to change this unfair policy.

In addition to supporting the above change, we also support the other provisions in SB 2246, increasing the time limit for application for a higher education board allowance and increasing the maximum age for the benefit from 21 to 26 years with a maximum benefit length of 60 months. Given the start these kids have had in life, many need a little extra time to finish their education. It is worthwhile giving them the extra time as higher education is among the key ingredients helping them rise above their traumatic beginnings.

Please support these changes and eliminate this inequity, promoting adoption parity by extending higher education benefits to foster kids blessed to find forever adoptive families.