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The Twenty-Fifth Legislature, State of Hawaii
Hawaii State House of Representatives
Committee on Human Services

Testimony by
Hawaii Government Employees Association
March 15, 2010

H.C.R. 219/H.R. 148 -DIRECTING THE
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES TO
STOP ITS PROPOSED REORGANIZATION
OF THE BENEFITS, EMPLOYMENT,
SUPPORT SERVICES AND MED-QUEST
DIVISIONS UNTIL A LEGISLATIVE TASK
FORCE EVALUATES THE PROPOSAL

The Hawaii Government Employees' Association, AFSCME Local 152, AFL-CIO strongly supports the purpose and intent of H.C.R. 219 and H.R. 148. Both resolutions direct the Department of Human Services (DHS) not to expend any funds on the reorganization of two large divisions and the creation of a third that will adversely impact thousands of Hawaii residents until a legislative task force submits its findings and recommendations to the 2011 Legislature.

We believe that a reorganization proposal of this complexity and with such far reaching effects must be thoroughly evaluated before implementation. As proposed, the reorganization would radically change how people apply and receive welfare, food stamps and Medicaid benefits by closing at least 31 eligibility offices and replacing these with two processing centers one in Hilo and the other in Honolulu. It will also cause over 225 employees to lose their jobs. The remaining DHS employees will have no direct contact with clients except by telephone, fax or e-mail.

This proposed reorganization will make it very difficult for people to apply for welfare, food stamps and Medicaid benefits while more residents are struggling in the recession and turning to social services for help. Those who will be hurt are the elderly, disabled and mentally ill, many of whom do not have access to computers or fax machines.

The HGEA fully supports the concerns of the DHS employees who oppose the proposed reorganization and take their jobs of serving Hawaii's most vulnerable population very seriously. It is extremely disappointing that our members were not involved in any discussions involving this initiative that makes drastic changes to the department's operations. The convening of the proposed task force will help to ensure that DHS staff at all levels has meaningful input in any proposed changes.

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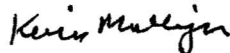
Of great concern to HGEA is that as a result of this proposed reorganization, over 225 positions will be cut from DHS, one of the state departments hardest hit by hundreds of layoffs late last year. While the remaining staff is doing the best they can, the current staffing level is not sufficient to keep up with the demand for the vital services provided to the public.

To their credit, of even greater concern to HGEA members and employees of the department is the negative impact this reorganization and proposed cuts will have on the public they serve. This reorganization is a major shift in how the DHS will provide service to the public. By their own admission, the DHS acknowledges that the demand for services has increased tremendously with the current economic downturn. It is inconceivable that the DHS would propose to close welfare offices in response and impose such a dramatic change in the delivery of services at this time. If implemented as proposed, we believe these changes will have a tremendous negative impact on our state.

In addition, the department continues to use private contracts to handle duties and responsibilities that can be performed by state employees. It is disturbing that the department would propose to cut over 225 positions without first considering the elimination of private contracts and vendors.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony and we ask for your support of H.C.R. 219 and H.R. 148.

Respectfully submitted,



for Nora A. Nomura
Deputy Executive Director

From: Joel Fischer [mailto:jfischer@hawaii.edu]
Sent: Friday, March 12, 2010 1:34 PM
To: HUS; testimony
Subject: HUS; HR148 3/15; 10AM; Rm329
Importance: High

HR 148
HUS; Chair, Rep. Mizuno

PLEASE PASS THIS RESO!

As an appointed member of DHS Director Lillian Koller's Financial Assistance Advisory Committee (FAAC), I am both amused at the rationale, and crushed by the plans, for the Eligibility Processing Operations division (EPOD) which is, in fact, a cover-up term for centralization of services and firing hundreds of workers.

The amusing part is in Lillian's last sentence in her letters to all Honolulu newspapers, in which she says her plan "is much better than raising taxes to prop up an inefficient and outdated government system." Since Lillian has been Director of DHS for almost eight years and is also a cabinet member and key state government insider, I guess she is saying, "I have met the enemy and she is me." The Republican rationalization that the government that they create and/or participate in for years is outmoded and inefficient only when **they** decide to inflict ruinous cuts simply is too transparent and ridiculous for words.

On the other hand, there is nothing funny about the potential tragedy that is about to unfold at DHS. Here's why:

When I started in social work, some 50 years ago, my first job was as a General Assistance (GA) caseworker for the Cook County Department of Public Assistance in Chicago. All GA clients were required to come to a single place for every possible purpose including to apply for help. The clients sat in a huge auditorium, and we caseworkers were required to stand on the stage and call out the name of our client who then had to walk through the huge crowd, onto the stage, and join me in an open cubicle to discuss their lives. The process was dehumanizing, oppressive and humiliating for the clients and it was dehumanizing for the caseworkers also who had participated in that process.

Fortunately, as the years passed, social workers and other advocates for clients have been able to do away with these warehousing projects and decentralize services so that clients in all areas of a community have the opportunity for easy access and more convenient, more personal and less oppressive interactions with their social workers.

Now, to my horror, the Governor and Director of Human Services tell us that they want to go back to that oppressive model by centralizing the crucial intake contacts with social workers. This effort flies in the face of the social service field's 50 years of evidence and experience showing that this type of centralization is an awful burden to place on our friends and neighbors who have come on hard times. Quite simply, it is unconscionable!

The Governor's hands are all over this disaster. When the state had more money, Lingle used DHS money as a slush fund for her own favorite projects. Now, when money is tight, Lingle chooses to put the hardest hit on the people who can least afford it, the very poor and the workers who try to help them.

As a member of FAAC, and as one of many in the community who truly care about what happens to our neighbors who are among the least fortunate, I call for an end to the plan to centralize intake and other services. It will make the lives of clients and their families miserable. Keep the part of the plan that allows clients to enroll by phone and online. That is a very good thing. But please do not restrict the ability of clients to have easy access to social workers in their own communities. Already, thousands of GA clients, all of whom are temporarily or permanently disabled, are forced to live on a measly cash benefit of only \$300 per month! That, in itself, is a travesty of a "safety net." But this latest plan to centralize intake would be a huge mistake that will serve only to humiliate and oppress those in our community who already are at the lowest point in their lives.

THANK YOU FOR INTRODUCING AND SUPPORTING THIS RESO.

Aloha, joel

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"It is reasonable that everyone who asks justice should DO justice."
Thomas Jefferson

"There comes a time when one must take a position that is neither safe, nor politic, nor popular, but one must take it because one's conscience tells one that it is right."
Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

"Never, never, never quit."
Winston Churchill