

hawaii family forum

Email to: HUSTestimony@Capitol.hawaii.gov
Hearing on: February 3, 2011 @ 9:00 a.m.
Conference Room #329

DATE: February 1, 2011

TO: House Committee on Human Services
Representative John Mizuno, Chair
Rep. Jo Jordan, Vice Chair

FROM: Allen Cardines, Jr., Executive Director

RE: Support for HB 1480 Relating to Human Services

Honorable Chairs and members of the House Committee on Human Services, I am Allen Cardines, **representing the Hawaii Family Forum**. Hawaii Family Forum is a non-profit, pro-family education organization committed to preserving and strengthening families in Hawaii, representing a network of various Christian Churches and denominations. We support this bill that would provide higher education scholarships to eligible former foster youth.

As many of you know, both the Hawaii Family Forum and the Hawaii Catholic Conference work 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, HB 1480 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.

HOPE In the Name of Christ (INC) foster care and adoption agency has 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
- 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.



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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.

We urge you to change this unfair policy.

In addition to supporting the above change, we also support the other provisions in HB 1480 which include increasing the maximum age for the benefit from 21 to 26 years. 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.

Please do not hesitate to contact me for more information.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.