

I am Laurie Arial Tochiki and I have the honor and privilege to serve as President and CEO of EPIC, `Ohana. Since 1997, EPIC `Ohana has been a non-profit partner to the Department of Human Services providing `Ohana Conferencing and Family Finding to the families in the child welfare system throughout the state of Hawai`i. Since 2004 we have also provided Youth Circles for transitioning youth. In a Youth Circle we work with a foster youth transitioning to adulthood to help them develop and execute a plan for their future. We help youth connect to the resources they need to make a successful transition. But we know that even with the transition plan in place, foster youth are not ready to be independent at 18. Actually very few children are ready for independent at 18 – even those children who have intact families and have not faced the issues and challenges of being a foster child.

The foster youth in Hawai`i are OUR children, and deserve the love and support that we give the children in our own biological families. It is our duty, but it is also a very good investment for the future. It is the goal of the child welfare service and family court to find permanent homes and connections for children who cannot be reunified with their parents. Even though this is the goal, each year more than 100 children “age out” of the system without permanent family and connections. This bill gives the state the tools it needs to help young people develop better paths to adulthood. It gives the state tools that will help develop the network of support young people in foster care need in order to succeed. It is an investment to minimize the homelessness, premature parenthood, poor educational outcomes, and criminal justice involvement that we know this population experiences without support.

This is not just a wild guess that with the support we may be able to avert the negative outcomes these youth experience. There is formidable research about the adolescent brain and development that tells us that youth are still developing and maturing during this time frame. Positive supports during this time can help to alleviate some of the harmful consequences of early trauma. Also, the Jim Casey Initiative, the Annie E. Casey Foundation, the federal Children’s Bureau and many other agencies have demonstrated best practices in services that improve outcomes for youth. The Department of Human Services has made tremendous strides to work with families, protect children and improve outcomes. I believe that the DHS, with the strong community partnerships it has built, is ready to extend care to foster youth, and do it right.

Thank you so much for your attention to this important measure.

Aloha

Laurie Arial Tochiki