

TESTIMONY OF
LEODOLOFF R. ASUNCION, JR.
CHAIR, PUBLIC UTILITIES COMMISSION
STATE OF HAWAII

TO THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON
HIGHER EDUCATION & TECHNOLOGY

February 1, 2023
2:00 p.m.

Chair Perruso, Vice Chair Kapela, and Members of the Committee:

MEASURE: H.B. No. 933

TITLE: RELATING TO TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACCESS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH PRINT DISABILITIES.

DESCRIPTION: Requires the Public Utilities Commission to use Universal Service Fund moneys to provide free telecommunications access to certain information for individuals with print disabilities.

POSITION:

The Public Utilities Commission (“Commission”) offers the following comments for consideration.

COMMENTS:

The Commission appreciates the intent of this measure to help support individuals with print disabilities through provision of free telecommunications access of certain information.

The Commission observes that the State of Hawaii’s (“State”) Universal Service Program and Fund (“USF”), while established in HRS § 269-41 and 269-42, and administrative rules promulgated as HAR chapter 6-81 has never been active due lack of authorization to start a State USF program, and further notes there are no funds in the State USF. The Commission does not know if the Commission has authority to draw from the State USF, and the Commission does not have a budget authorization to expend funds beyond its currently contemplated budget ceiling. The Commission lastly notes that the federal USF

is administered by the FCC for the purposes of assisting persons who have blindness and deafness.

The Commission respectfully suggests a change in language to provide clear authorization to implement the State USF, provide authority to draw from the State USF, and provide a budget authorization to expend funds via a set ceiling increase in the future.

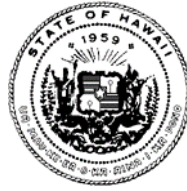
SECTION 1. [] "\$269- Universal service program; access for individuals with print disabilities. (a) The public utilities commission shall, as authorized by the Legislature, use available funds from the universal service fund established pursuant to section 269-42 to provide free telephonic access to time-sensitive information, including but not limited to state and local government information, public notices, emergency alerts, job opportunities, daily newspapers, and other content, to allow individuals who are blind or visually impaired to access information and services, so long as the amount of funds withdrawn from the universal service fund does not exceed \$ _____. The telephonic access shall be configured accessible to and usable by persons with print disabilities.

(b) The public utilities commission shall adopt rules to implement this section."

The Commission is willing to work with the Committee and stakeholders to further develop this new section in meeting the Legislature's intent.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this measure.

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR
KE KIA'ĀINA



CATHY BETTS
DIRECTOR
KA LUNA HO'OKELE

JOSEPH CAMPOS II
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
KA HOPE LUNA HO'OKELE

STATE OF HAWAII
KA MOKU'ĀINA O HAWAI'I
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
KA 'OIHANA MĀLAMA LAWELAWE KANAKA
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January 31, 2023

TO: The Honorable Representative Amy A. Perruso, Chair
House Committee on Higher Education & Technology

FROM: Cathy Betts, Director

SUBJECT: **HB 933 – RELATING TO TELECOMMUNICATIONS ACCESS FOR INDIVIDUALS
WITH PRINT DISABILITIES.**

Hearing: February 1, 2023, 2:00 p.m.
Conference Room 309 & Videoconferencing, State Capitol

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: The Department of Human Services (DHS) appreciates the intent of this bill, provides comments, and defers to the Public Utilities Commission.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the bill is to require the public utilities commission to provide free telecommunications access to certain information for persons with print disabilities through use of the universal service fund.

The Department of Human Services, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR), administers state-wide vocational rehabilitation services programs for persons with physical and mental disabilities, including the blind and deaf communities. These include independent living rehabilitation services for persons with severe disabilities, general services for persons who are blind and visually impaired, and the disability determination of claims for Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income benefits issued by the Social Security Administration. DVR recognizes the importance of providing timely and essential information to all community members, including those with print disabilities, in an accessible

format. DVR looks forward to the day the State of Hawaii's Universal Service Program and Fund (USF) are authorized and implemented.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments in support of this measure.

Testimony of James Gashel
Submitted for National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii
Committee on Higher Education and Technology (HET)
Hawaii State House of Representatives
Thirty-second Legislature, regular session of 2023
February 1, 2023, 2:00 PM, hearing on HB933

Good afternoon chair, vice chair, and members. I am James Gashel, representing the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Hawaii, proudly supporting HB933 on behalf of people with print disabilities of all ages throughout our state. Thank you for considering this important bill and for scheduling this hearing.

HB933 is all about making information more accessible to anyone with a print disability. Blindness, visual impairment, and learning disabilities, including dyslexia are among the most prevalent forms of print disability. Lack of timely access to information can be a real, day in and day out problem for several thousand residents of our state who can't see or use standard print as their primary form of communication, leaving them at an information deficit.

To overcome this, HB933 proposes to Amend HRS chapter 269, relating to public utilities, by directing the Public Utilities Commission to use universal service funds to provide a free telephone service for persons with print disabilities that offers state and local government information (including public notices) and other information (including current daily newspapers, magazines, emergency alerts, job opportunities, and other timely content) using accessible formats.

Accessible formats provide information in an alternative manner or form that gives persons with print disabilities access to information equivalent to access for a person without a disability. These formats include converting printed information into audio, Braille, or both.

In directing the Public Utilities Commission to provide a telephone accessible information service for persons with print disabilities, HB933 is consistent with the purposes of the Universal Service Program defined by the legislature.

Existing law, section HRS 269-41 establishes the Public Utilities Commission's Universal Service Program and states the program's purpose and principles. These include assisting "low income customers and customers with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining access to a basic set of telecommunications services as determined by the commission."

More to the point, existing law also directs the universal service program to promote "affordable access throughout the state to enhanced government information and services, including education, health care, public safety, and other government services."

By definition, persons with print disabilities are unable to obtain and use vital information needed to live in our knowledge based society. By far the vast majority of those who need

accessible format information are members of our kupuna population who lack technology, internet access, and training. The need for accessible format information for such persons became especially acute during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic with release of vital orders, notices, and statistical reports not accessible to persons with print disabilities.

Technology needed to obtain and convert information and distribute accessible formats is available and widely used in the U. S. Texas, Georgia, and ten other states on the mainland use Universal Service Program funds to support the type of information services called for in HB933. If enacted, as proposed, the Public Utilities Commission would have a rule making proceeding which would better define the service and expected costs.

By way of full disclosure, NFB of Hawaii presently fulfills a contract with the Department of Human Services (DHS), resulting in the type of service described in HB933. This has been a very successful program in Hawaii for several years. However, providing information services for persons with print disabilities is also a legitimate responsibility of the Public Utilities Commission's Universal Service Program, analogous to support for telecommunications services for people who are deaf.

We appreciate the start-up support being provided by DHS, but also believe the Public Utilities Commission, more than DHS, should have long-range responsibility to support a continuing service. What the exact service will be and how it will be provided, will be up to the Public Utilities Commission within the parameters of HB933 as eventually enacted.

Mahalo for considering HB933. Members of the NFB of Hawaii strongly support this bill and hope you will do so too.

Testimony of Virgil Stinnett

Committee on Higher Education and Technology (HET)

Hawaii State House of Representatives

Thirty-second Legislature, regular session of 2023

February 1, 2023, 2:00 PM, hearing on HB933

Good afternoon chair, vice chair, and members. I am Virgil Stinnett, President of the National Federation of the Blind of Hawai'i and a local businessman. I proudly support HB933 on behalf of people with print disabilities of all ages throughout our state. Thank you for considering this important bill and for scheduling this hearing.

Critical to my participation locally and nationally, I am able to use the Newline telephonic service which gives me access to important business journals, breaking news, otherwise not available to me in traditional formats. Local events, political information, engage equally with my business peers, community service, and so much more, including receipt of critical emergency and weather alerts otherwise not always accessible or available to me and others who are blind and print disabled.

HB933 is all about making information more accessible to anyone with a print disability. Blindness, visual impairment, and learning disabilities, including dyslexia are among the most prevalent forms of print disability.

I stand in support of testimony submitted by The National Federation of the Blind of Hawai'i.

Mahalo for your support and consideration of HB933, a vital step to ensure the continuation of Newline telephonic services in Hawai'i.

Testimony of Hoku Burrows

Committee on Higher Education and Technology (HET))

Hawaii State House of Representatives

Thirty-second Legislature, regular session of 2023

February 1, 2023, 2:00 PM, hearing on HB933

Good afternoon chair, vice chair, and members. My name is Hoku Burrows, a member of the National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii, supporting HB933 on behalf of people with print disabilities of all ages throughout our state. Thank you for considering this important bill and for scheduling this hearing.

As a blind woman residing in Honolulu, I use the Newsline telephonic service as my only access to local events, information that otherwise require reading print or digital access. I only have access to a simple old telephone. Through my phone I am able to stay abreast of political, community and other important information that allows me to fully participate in Hawai'i.

HB933 is all about making information more accessible to anyone with a print disability. Blindness, visual impairment, and learning disabilities, including dyslexia are among the most prevalent forms of print disability.

I stand in support of testimony submitted by The National Federation of the Blind of Hawai'i.

Mahalo nui loa for your taking the time to hear my testimony in support of HB933.

Testimony of Katie Keim

Committee on Higher Education and Technology (HET))

Hawaii State House of Representatives

Thirty-second Legislature, regular session of 2023

February 1, 2023, 2:00 PM, hearing on HB933

Good afternoon chair, vice chair, and members. My name is Katie Keim, a member of the National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii, supporting HB933 on behalf of people with print disabilities of all ages throughout our state. Thank you for considering this important bill and for scheduling this hearing.

As a blind business woman in Hawai'i, I am able to use the Newsline telephonic service which gives me access to important information of print material I am not able to get in traditional formats. Local events, political information, fully engage equally with my business peers, community service, and so much more, including receipt of critical emergency and weather alerts otherwise not always accessible or available to me and others who are blind and print disabled.

HB933 is all about making information more accessible to anyone with a print disability. Blindness, visual impairment, and learning disabilities, including dyslexia are among the most prevalent forms of print disability.

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