

March 28, 2023

Senator Joy A. San Buenaventura
Chair, Senate Committee on Health and Human Services
415 S. Beretania St., Room 213
Honolulu, HI 96813

Re: Nomination to the Commission on Fatherhood (GM641)-Response to Letter of March 24, 2023

Honorable Senator San Buenaventura:

Please see responses to your questions below.

1. Why do you wish to be a member of the Commission on Fatherhood?

Nearing completion of my two-year first term on the Commission on Fatherhood, I would like to continue with a second term in order to continue to provide the opportunity to incorporate the perspective of a gay father, not only to issues related to gay fatherhood but fatherhood in general.

As the current Chair and Finance Chair, I am working to streamlining our recurring and administrative activities so that we can be more involved in the community and legislative affairs.

In addition, I would like to help increase public awareness and acceptance of gay fatherhood which includes accepting children (such as my own) of gay fathers as well as acceptance by their friends, their friends' families, their teachers, coaches, religious and non-religious leaders and anyone else who children of gay fathers encounter in their daily lives. Furthermore there are fathers who learn they themselves have gay children and oftentimes need support.

2. How do you perceive the role and responsibilities of a member of the Commission on Fatherhood?

I believe the Commission on Fatherhood offers the opportunity for a variety of people with a particular interest in fatherhood to provide their viewpoints and perspectives and to pursue and support programs that support healthy fatherhood.

I believe it is essential for members of the Commission to maintain an open mind and open heart to each other, those the Commission advises and reports to and also within the

general community. Although our opinions and feelings may differ, the members should be able to learn from each other, respect each other, and recognize that approaches which may work for one does not necessarily work for all fathers, organizations, programs or portions of our community.

Furthermore, I believe a Commissioner should maintain an awareness of bills related to the Commission, fatherhood and the wellbeing of children, and be open to viewpoints which are different about parenting and education.

3. Given your understanding of the role and responsibilities of a member of the Commission on Fatherhood, why do you believe that you are qualified for the position? Please include a brief statement of your skills, expertise, or knowledge that would aid in your decision-making ability as a member of the Commission on Fatherhood.

Much adversity I have personally dealt with in my life has been from the perspective of being gay, which frames who I am today as a gay father. Like other gay men, I have gone through the challenges of understanding who I am, as well as dealing with first presenting myself to my own family, and then to the world around me. In fact, I deal with 'coming out' on a regular basis. There are many stereotypes about gay men, but in reality we are as diverse as any given group and no single set of standards or generalizations applies to all of us. I would bring this background with me to the Commission.

Furthermore, as a small business owner, having started Hawaii5500 LLC in 2017, I bring the qualifications of being a self-starter and being responsible to myself for the responsibilities of my clients, employee, and being able to contribute as one of two supporters of my own family by means of the successful operation of my business. To be specific, I am a third party administrator with a focus on compliance of employer sponsored retirement plans. At a minimum, I help employers with retirement plan design and setup, plan documents and amendments, calculation of contributions and distributions, and preparation of IRS forms, especially Form 5500.

I approach decision making with trying to be objective and attempting to minimize personal bias. There are times when my opinions do not match a general consensus and I must defer to differing opinions. There are other times when my minority perspective deserves pursuing by means of increasing the understanding of where my point of view is coming from and why I believe a certain idea or approach is a reasonable solution.

4. What do you hope to accomplish during your term of service?

During my second, and final, term in office, I hope to continue my current role as Chair and Finance Chair and streamline our annual activities, as well as play a more significant role in Legislative testimony. I hope to have discussions within the Commission about our different worldviews.

5. Name three qualities that best describe you and that would make you stand out. How would these qualities benefit the Commission on Fatherhood?

Three aspects about me that I believe would highlight my perspective on the Commission:

- **Gay**
Although being gay is how I was born, I would also view it as a quality. I would bring that background to the Commission. I would also like to express that I do not represent gays as a group but rather the perspective of a father who is gay. I see myself as a member of the Commission who happens to be gay, rather than the 'Gay Commissioner'.
- **Pragmatic Optimism**
I find that by nature I tend to be optimistic about many things in life. That optimism extends to me putting in the effort to strive to make things work. I like to believe that good will come from good, from decency, but it takes effort to get there and practical results do not just happen.
- **Individuality**
I grew up with a twin brother who very much looks like me (we were told we are fraternal but just found out a few years ago that we are indeed identical). We were always known as 'the twins'. I could not wait to grow up and be my own person. As a parent of three children, including fraternal twins, I have focused on each of their individualities as well.

Additionally, when focused on individuality, it is my desire that gay fathers not be treated as one simple group, but rather a group of diverse individuals, just like any given subgroup of fathers.

6. Name one previous experience that would make you stand out. How would this benefit the Commission on Fatherhood?

Unquestionably, the challenge of trying to become a father has been a hugely significant experience in my life. With my partner, now husband, I pursued, against many barriers, and over a number of years, fatherhood. This included rejection by a local Surrogate

coordinator (over 10 years ago) and a period of sheer and extreme emptiness at not knowing if fatherhood was in our future.

Although there are multiple paths to becoming parents, from day one, our intent was to become parents by surrogacy. We were ultimately not able to afford doing this in the United States, so we found our solution in India. This involved multiple trips, failed egg donors and surrogates, and seven failures out of nine IVF attempts. We ultimately had two successes and now have 12-year old boy/girl twins and a 10-year old son. This also involved challenges of cross-cultural communication with our Indian clinic and other persons involved with our surrogacy journey.

In my view of fatherhood as not just being a father, but the pursuit of becoming a father, I would bring this perspective to the Commission on Fatherhood as this applies to gay and non-gay individuals alike.

7. Can you foresee any possible conflicts of interests that could arise during your service on the Commission on Fatherhood? How would you overcome any possible conflicts of interest?

I believe that part of the interest in the nomination of a gay man to this Commission has been that there continues to exist challenges for gay dads. I live in a world that does not accept me and my children fully. Perhaps I may not be accepted in full for my opinions or beliefs, or even legitimacy as a father, on the Commission.

I do not have an 'in your face' personality and I will continue to be me. I approach this in my life by simply setting an example of striving to be a productive member of our community as well as my role as a committed father. I believe exposure to me and my family helps to normalize who I and we are.

I would also invite you to attend any of our meetings, which are held in hybrid format, in person and on Zoom.

Please do not hesitate to reach out to me with additional questions.

Sincerely yours,

Jeff Esmond

Jeff Esmond

Statement on day of Testimony

Honorable Chair, Senators,

Good afternoon and aloha.

My gratitude to the honor of this nomination is beyond expression, and I thank you for your time and consideration today.

My spoken testimony today is in addition to my written responses that you have reviewed.

I am a gay dad. I have three children, ten-year old boy/girl twins and an 8-year old son who all attend public school here in Kaneohe. I'm incredibly proud of my children and would be more than happy to share videos, which may include them performing at the Keiki Hula Competition, the Windward Speech Festival, chorus performances, or my older son who has been a State Champion in gymnastics for his age group and level.

Yes I am proud, just like many other dads. I am an incredibly lucky Dad.

But, to know me is to know that as a gay man, it was not easy to become a father. Our path was surrogacy, which ultimately took us to India. It took several years, multiple challenges, and a lot of tears. We had 7 IVF failures. But all that matters is that we also had 2 IVF successes.

Being a dad has been the best experience of my life and I am doing what I can to make the most of it for me and my entire family. This includes learning to be a better person and especially a better father.

As I mentioned in my written response to the committee, although I am gay, it is not my interest to be known as the Gay Commissioner, but rather as a Commissioner who happens to be gay, just like other commissioners may happen to not be gay.

However, as a gay man and gay father, should my nomination be approved, there are certainly gay issues related to fatherhood that I am especially interested in. These include support for:

- Gay fathers like myself – whether by adoption, surrogacy, or from an earlier marriage
- Fathers of children who come out or have not yet come out as gay
- Fathers of children who are transgender

Yesterday I called up my college roommate to talk to her about her transgender son. For clarification, her son was born in a female body.

I want to say something very important about being a father to an LGBT child. Coming out to your parents is not just about the child, but a significant experience for the parents. Based on my experience, and I say this without statistics in front of me, fathers have generally had a harder time dealing with this than mothers.

The support that such fathers need though not only extends to them learning to accept and support their children, but it leads to the ability to be a parent to a child who may be undergoing depression and suicide, and medical help that may not have been imagined. This is not easy.

There are also fathers whose children are friends with children of gay dads, or children who themselves are LGBT. I can say personally that, being out there as a gay dad, I have seen a number of fathers who are somewhat afraid of me or the idea of our kids being friends, or in the same group or team.

We have come a long way with acceptance of LGBT, but there is still much support that is needed out in the community, including many types of fathers.

I thank you again for this incredibly and humbling opportunity.

Aloha

Trans barriers – medical, dealing with misgendering, depression, gender dysphoria