



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

‘ŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAII

Legislative Testimony

Hō'ike Mana'o I Mua O Ka 'Aha'ōlelo

Testimony Presented Before the
Senate Committee on Ways and Means
Wednesday, April 2, 2025, at 10:01 a.m.

By

Debora Halbert, Vice President for Academic Strategy
University of Hawai'i System

HB 1171 HD2 – RELATING TO THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII RELIEF FUNDING

Chair Dela Cruz, Vice Chair Moriwaki, and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of HB 1171 HD2 relating to the University of Hawai'i (UH) relief funding.

HB 1171 HD2 would require UH to allocate an amount of funds, yet to be determined, exclusively for disaster relief purposes. In doing so, the United States Department of Education (USDOE) would recognize these funds as state aid when distributing assistance to students in direct response to an emergency or a disaster declared by the governor. As state aid, these relief funds would be exempt from being classified as financial assistance, ensuring that they do not affect the student's financial aid package.

Currently, each UH campus has institutional funds available for students facing emergencies and crises. However, these funds are noted on students' accounts, which can lead to the reduction or reversal of previously awarded scholarships or other forms of financial aid. As a result, students often feel penalized for receiving relief funds, which undermines the purpose of providing assistance during difficult times.

This measure does not request additional funding from the State. Instead, it requires UH to direct an allocation of existing institutional funds specifically for disaster relief. Thereafter, if an emergency is declared and when UH decides to award funding specifically for disaster relief, because those funds were required by the State, there would be no negative impacts to the student recipients.

Passing this measure would enable UH to offer financial support to students without adverse effects during already stressful disaster situations. It is anticipated that the UH's ability to provide disaster relief funding will enhance student's retention and improve overall student success.

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



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII STUDENT CAUCUS

Date 04/01/2025

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS AND MEANS

Relating to HB 1171 HD2

Aloha Chair Dela-Cruz, Vice Chair Moriwaki, and Members of the Committee:

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide testimony.

The University of Hawai'i Student Caucus (UHSC) is formally authorized to serve as a system-wide association of all University of Hawai'i campus student governments, representing approximately 50,000 students across the 10 campuses of the UH System.

The UHSC unanimously shares a position of strong support for HB 1171 HD2.

We commend the University of Hawaii for wanting to financially help students as much as possible. In recent years, there have been numerous disasters and other states of emergency that have impacted our student populations across the state. Each time one of these situations has occurred, UH campuses have offered assistance to students, often going above and beyond demonstrating a standard of care and compassion for students. This measure would allow UH to further extend this by providing financial assistance during times of declared emergencies.

Current attempts to provide financial aid to students count against their financial aid. When the Maui Wildfires occurred in August 2023, UH campuses found themselves wanting to help, but unable to fully without resulting in negative impacts to students. This shouldn't be the case. Students were already very stressed by the loss of their homes, vehicles, jobs, pets, and in some cases, loved ones. With this measure, UH will be able to comply with guidance from the USDOE that allows UH to provide financial assistance to students impacted by a disaster without risk of negatively impacting their financial aid package.

There is more to be gained than lost by passing this measure. This measure does not ask for an appropriation nor will it have a significant financial impact on either the state or the University of Hawai'i since UH has already expressed wanting to provide additional financial support to students during times of emergency. This measure is simply a pathway to allow that to take place, essentially making it possible for UH to set aside an amount of funds each year to be used specifically for disaster relief.

Sincerely,
Ronald Sturges,
Chairperson, UH Student Caucus