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February 2, 2025

TO: The Honorable Senator San Buenaventura, Chair
Senate Committee on Health and Human Services

FROM: Ryan I. Yamane, Director

SUBJECT: **SB 1419 – RELATING TO ACT 253, SESSION LAWS OF HAWAII 2023.**

Hearing: Monday, February 3, 2025, 1:00 p.m.
Conference Room 225 & Via Videoconference, State Capitol

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: The Department of Human Services (DHS) supports this administration measure and provides comments.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the bill is to update the name of the Neighbor Islands Blind and Visually Impaired Service Pilot Program established by Act 253, Session Laws of Hawaii 2023, by replacing the term "visually impaired" with "low vision" and clarifies the pilot program's implementation timeframes. Sunsets 06/30/2029.

Act 253, Session Laws of Hawaii 2023 (Act 253), established the Neighbor Islands Blind and Visually Impaired Service Pilot Program within the Department of Human Services. The goal of Act 253 is to bridge the gaps in services for blind and low vision residents across the State, particularly focusing on those living on the neighbor islands. DHS Division of Vocational Rehabilitation's (DVR) efforts to implement the Act were delayed until July 2024 as the staff were responding to the needs of staff and residents impacted by the August 2023 Maui wildfires.

Despite the delays, DVR engaged a consultant, posted a survey, and had several in-

person and virtual meetings to gather information from blind and low vision neighbor island residents to discuss potential training and services that the pilot program may offer. A report to the legislature was submitted in December 2024 detailing DVR's efforts, findings, and recommendations of the working group that include requests for two additional temporary full-time equivalent positions within the department and appropriations to implement the pilot program. The report to the legislature may be found at https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/Ryamane_Act-253-2023_Neighbor-Island-Blind-Low-Vision-Pilot-Program.pdf.

This bill will allow DVR to continue to implement the pilot program. If successful, DVR will extend and supplement the existing services provided by the Ho`opono Services for the Blind Branch of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. The services, envisioned by Act 253 and recommended by the working group, will include: peer-to-peer outreach, sight loss adjustment, peer counseling support, transportation, technology access, enrichment activities, workforce development, mobility training, advocacy training, and other services. These services will support participants' goals to become and sustain their independence and improve their social integration. The pilot program would not require the participant to be seeking employment, though the skills gained would contribute to the participant's employability. The pilot program aims to serve 150 individuals in the first year (SFY 26) and 250 individuals in the second year (SFY 27).

For the state fiscal biennium 25-27, to implement the pilot program, State-funded positions are requested as DVR's current federal grant requirements do not allow the provision of services to individuals ineligible for Ho`opono's existing programs. Ho`opono's federal funding requires the participant to be seeking employment. DVR's Ho`opono program will need one (1.00) FTE Program Specialist IV and one (1.00) FTE Administrative Assistant II for a total of \$193,230 in general funds for each year of the biennium. Additional general funds are required for Implementation Support (\$70,000), Program Costs and Supplies (\$85,000), Contracted Providers of Services (\$1,625,000), Assistive Technology (\$325,000), and Travel (\$8,624) for a total of \$2,113,824 over the biennium.

Of note, the administration initially thought an appropriation request through a

Governor's message (GM) would be forthcoming to fund this pilot program. However, due to the priorities of the federal administration, at this time, it is uncertain whether a GM will be made to insert the appropriation into the budget. As the bill moves forward, we will update the Legislature on the necessary appropriation.

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

Testimony of Katie Keim

National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii

Committee on Health and Human Services (HHS)

Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session

February 3, 2025, 1:00 pm, hearing on SB1419, Conference Room 225

Good afternoon, Chair San Buenaventura, Vice Chair Henry Aquino, and committee members. My name is Katie Keim representing The National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii, (NFBH), supporting SB1419, RELATING TO ACT 253, which established the neighbor islands blind and visually impaired service pilot program within the Department of Human Services.

The National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii supports the amendments replacing the term "visually impaired" with the term "low vision" and clarifying the pilot program's implementation timeframes.

A leader in the NFB of Hawaii, nationally we have been working to establish the term "low vision" as the respected standard language adopted. SB1419's amendment is in line with our national resolution.

In the past my career included a position in the Department of Human Services, Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. My caseload consisted of primarily duties on Oahu, yet with limited instructors on our neighbor islands, traveled every few months to neighbor islands working with primarily older individuals who are blind teaching independent living skills essential to the quality of a blind and low vision individuals' life. Act 253 supports the need of our blind neighbor island residents for quality services in a timely and regular fashion. As an individual who became blind as an adult at the age of 36, the skills I learned and mentoring received by blind members of the National Federation of the Blind, gave me tools and hope that have enriched my life in ways I could not imagine at that time. Act 253 establishes an opportunity for hope for all blind and low vision residents of Hawaii.

The National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii stands in support of SB1419 amendments and Act 253's important program to serve our neighbor island blind and low vision residents. Mahalo for hearing SB1419 and moving it forward this session.