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STATE OF HAWAII | KA MOKU'ĀINA O HAWAII
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT
KA 'OIHANA HO'OMŌHALA LIMAHANA
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Statement of
BRENN H. HASHIMOTO
Director, Department of Human Resources Development

Before the
SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR AND TECHNOLOGY
Monday, March 24, 2025
3:00 PM
State Capitol, Conference Room 224

In consideration of
**SCR 67/SR 51 REQUESTING THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES
DEVELOPMENT TO MORE CLOSELY COOPERATE WITH THE HUMAN
RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT UNITS ASSIGNED TO STATE AGENCIES
COMPRISING THE STATE'S PUBLIC MENTAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM TO
DETERMINE THE NECESSARY ACTIONS TO EXPEDITE HIRING AND FILLING
CRITICAL VACANCIES, INCLUDING SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS THE OBSTACLES
AND CHALLENGES UNIQUE TO THE MENTAL HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE.**

Chair Aquino, Vice Chair Lee, and the members of the committee:

The Department of Human Resources Development (HRD) supports the intent of SCR 67/SR 51.

HRD values the critical services provided by professionals within the State's public mental health care system and recognizes the urgent need to strengthen recruitment and address persistent vacancies in this area. We remain committed to working collaboratively with the human resources offices of the state agencies that make up the State's mental health care system.

In support of this effort, HRD will request that departments with subject matter expertise in mental health care actively participate in this initiative. These departments possess the industry-specific knowledge, operational insight, and data necessary to identify practical solutions and inform policy decisions. While HRD is prepared to convene discussions and provide guidance from a human resources perspective, we respectfully ask that participating agencies share relevant information and contribute meaningfully to the development of actionable strategies. To this end, we request the following

amendments to the current language:

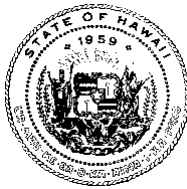
“BE IT RESOLVED by the Senate of the Thirty-third Legislature of the State of Hawaii, Regular Session of 2025, the House of Representatives concurring, that the Department of Human Resources Development and the state agencies comprising the State's public mental health care system ~~is~~ are requested to more closely cooperate ~~with the human resources development units assigned to state agencies comprising the State's public mental health care system~~ to determine the necessary actions to expedite hiring and filling critical vacancies, including solutions to address the obstacles and challenges unique to the mental health care workforce; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that a certified copy of this Concurrent Resolution be transmitted to the Director of Human Resources Development, Director of Health, Superintendent of the Department of Education, Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation, and the Chief Justice of the Judiciary.”

We look forward to cooperating with our partner agencies to address the unique challenges facing the mental health care workforce and to support efforts that will expedite hiring and strengthen the State’s overall capacity to deliver these vital services.

Thank you for your consideration of our testimony. We are available for questions.

JOSH B. GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR OF HAWAII
KE KIA'ĀINA O KA
MOKU'ĀINA 'O HAWAII



KATHERINE AUMER, PhD
COUNCIL CHAIRPERSON
LUNA HO'OMALU O KA PAPA

STATE OF HAWAII
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STATE COUNCIL ON MENTAL HEALTH
Testimony to the Senate Committee on Labor and Technology
In Strong Support of S.C.R. 67
REQUESTING THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT
TO MORE CLOSELY COOPERATE WITH THE HUMAN RESOURCES
DEVELOPMENT UNITS ASSIGNED TO STATE AGENCIES COMPRISING THE
STATE'S PUBLIC MENTAL HEALTH CARE SYSTEM TO DETERMINE THE
NECESSARY ACTIONS TO EXPEDITE HIRING AND FILLING CRITICAL
VACANCIES, INCLUDING SOLUTIONS TO ADDRESS THE OBSTACLES AND
CHALLENGES UNIQUE TO THE MENTAL HEALTH CARE WORKFORCE
March 24, 2025 3:00 p.m., Room224 and Video

Chair Aquino, Vice Chair Lee, and Members of the Committee:

Hawai'i law, HRS §334-10, established the State Council on Mental Health as a 21-member body to advise on the allocation of resources, statewide needs, and programs affecting more than one county as well as to advocate for adults with serious mental illness, children with serious emotional disturbances, individuals with mental illness or emotional problems, including those with co-occurring substance abuse disorders. Members are residents from diverse backgrounds representing mental health service providers and recipients, students and youth, parents, and family members. Members include representatives of state agencies on mental health, criminal justice, housing, Medicaid/MedQUEST, social services, vocational rehabilitation, and education. Members include representatives from the Hawai'i Advisory Commission on Drug Abuse and Controlled Substances and county service area boards on mental health and substance abuse.

The State Council on Mental Health **strongly supports** Senate Concurrent Resolution 67 (SCR67), which urges the Department of Human Resources Development (DHRD) to collaborate more closely with human resources units in state agencies within our public mental health care system. This collaboration aims to expedite the hiring process and address the unique challenges faced in recruiting and retaining mental health professionals.

The Urgent Need for Action

Workforce shortage has been defined as not having the right number of people with the right skills in the right place at the right time, to provide the right services to the right people. The crisis is dire – threatening sustainability especially of the public mental health care system.

Hawai'i is facing a severe shortage of mental health professionals and workers, impacting the availability and quality of care statewide. This shortage particularly affects vulnerable populations, including youth, first responders, rural residents, older adults, and Native Hawaiian and other underserved communities, all of whom struggle to access timely and consistent mental health support.

Mental Health Demand Across Populations

Aging Population: Hawai'i has one of the fastest-growing aging populations in the United States. By 2030, nearly one in four residents will be 65 or older (University of Hawai'i Center on the Family, 2023). Older adults are at heightened risk for depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline. They are also at heightened risk for chronic physical ailments. The co-occurring conditions require collaboration and continuum of care. Older adults, particularly in rural areas, face significant barriers to accessing care. Houseless residents, 33 percent reported mental illness, are aging (2024 Hawaii Point in Time Count). These challenges are compounded by an already stretched workforce, leading to delays and gaps in service delivery and collaborative care.

Youth Mental Health Crisis: Suicide remains the leading cause of death among youth aged 10-24 in Hawai'i. According to the Hawai'i State Department of Health, 40% of high school students report persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, and 16% have seriously considered suicide (Hawai'i State Department of Health, 2023). These challenges disproportionately affect youth in underserved communities. Increased availability of mental health professionals would help address this urgent need for care.

First Responders and Public Safety Personnel: Mental health challenges among first responders—law enforcement officers, paramedics, and firefighters—are widespread. Nationally, first responders are more likely to die by suicide than in the line of duty (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2023). These professionals face chronic stress,

trauma, and burnout, but due to workforce shortages and stigma around mental health care, many struggle to access needed services.

Rural and Neighbor Island Disparities: Rural residents, particularly on Molokaʻi, Kauaʻi, and Hawaiʻi Island, experience significant barriers to mental health care. There are far fewer mental health professionals per capita in these areas compared to Oʻahu. As a result, residents are often forced to wait long periods for care, or worse, may rely on emergency services for mental health crises (Hawaiʻi State Department of Health, 2022).

Challenges in the Mental Health Workforce

High Vacancy Rates: Key state agencies—such as the Department of Health, Department of Human Services, Department of Education, Department of Corrections, and Judiciary—face ongoing challenges in filling mental health positions. This is leading to service delays and gaps in care.

Impact on Team-Based Care for Severe Mental Illness: Individuals with severe mental illness require a team-based approach, where case management integrates psychiatrists, nurses, psychologists, and other specialists to provide effective integrated care. Successful community tenure also depends on family support, housing, and coordinated services. However, workforce shortages disrupt this balance—when even one team member is missing, the ability to provide effective, continuous care is compromised. Ensuring adequate staffing is essential for maintaining quality treatment and long-term stability.

Burnout and Retention Issues: Mental health professionals are experiencing high levels of burnout due to excessive caseloads, administrative burdens, and exposure to trauma. This contributes to high turnover rates and difficulty maintaining a stable workforce, which only exacerbates the challenges faced by communities in need of care.

Competitive Hiring Challenges: State agencies across the nation face significant challenges in attracting and retaining qualified mental health professionals due to competition from a variety of sectors and organizations that offer more competitive salaries, comprehensive benefits, and greater flexibility in work arrangements. These factors make it difficult for public sector agencies to maintain a stable workforce. According to the National Council for Mental Wellbeing, many (over 80%) behavioral health professionals are concerned that without public policy change the need will grow and many more are leaving for opportunities that provide more

attractive compensation and work-life balance (National Council for Mental Wellbeing, 2023).

The Imperative for SCR67

By adopting SCR67, the Legislature takes a critical step toward:

Expediting and Modernizing Hiring Practices: Ensuring that vacancies in mental health care positions are filled more efficiently through improved coordination and practices between DHRD and state agencies.

Developing Targeted Recruitment and Retention Strategies: Addressing the unique challenges faced by mental health professionals in the public sector, including workload management, supportive environment and professional support, and compensation.

Strengthening Access to Mental Health Services: A robust workforce will improve services for all, including older adults, youth, first responders, Native Hawaiian communities, rural residents, houseless residents and those with disabilities who are in urgent need of care.

Public Health: Mental health is public health. It has profound impact on physical, social and economic well-being. Lack of prevention, treatment and recovery support due to high levels of vacancies lead only to further economic burdens – higher health care cost, loss of productivity, and social cost.

Amendments requested

It is requested that copies of the Resolution be sent to the different Departments. It is requested further that the Department of Human Resource Development also report to the Legislature what has been done to effectuate the actions sought in the next two (2) years.

Conclusion

The State Council on Mental Health urges the passage of SCR67 as a necessary step toward improving mental health care access and workforce sustainability. Addressing hiring and retention challenges will help ensure that residents across the state—especially those in high-risk and underserved groups—receive the quality mental health services they need and deserve.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify in strong support of this
Resolution.

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VISION: A Hawai'i where people of all ages with mental health challenges can enjoy recovery in the community of their choice.

MISSION: To advocate for a Hawai'i where all persons affected by mental illness can access necessary treatment and support to live full lives in the community of their choice.

LATE

SR-51

Submitted on: 3/24/2025 11:17:43 AM

Testimony for LBT on 3/24/2025 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Mary Pat Waterhouse	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair Aquino and Members of the Committee,

This is a good start to expedite hiring of mental health workers who are understaffed throughout the State. I'm a member of the State Council of Mental Health and we often hear it takes up to 8 months for an individual that applied for a position at DOH to hear back from the department that is interested in hiring. By that time most applicants have taken another job.

Please consider adding language that requires DHRD to report back to the LBT Committee at the beginning of next session regarding what they have done to address this problem and what progress has been made in expediting hiring of mental health workers.

Mahalo for considering this resolution and my testimony.

Aloha,

Mary Pat Waterhouse