

A JOINT LEGISLATIVE EFFORT

E-Mail to: testimony@capitol.hawaii.gov

Regarding: Senate HSP hearing

Hearing on: March 20, 2007 @ 1:45 p.m. in room 016

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Date: March 16, 2007

To: Senate Committee on Human Services & Public Housing
Honorable Suzanne Chun Oakland, Chair
Honorable Les Ihara, Vice Chair

From: Kelly M. Rosati, JD
Executive Director, Hawaii Family Forum
Lobbyist, Roman Catholic Church in the State of Hawaii

Re: **Strong Support for HB 1356 HD 2** Relating to Higher
Education Board Allow. for Former Foster Youth

Honorable Chair and members of the Senate Committee on Human Services & Public Housing, I am Kelly Rosati, **representing both the Hawaii Family Forum and the Roman Catholic Church in the State of Hawaii.**

Hawaii Family Forum is a non-profit, pro-family education organization committed to preserving and strengthening families in Hawaii. The Hawaii Catholic Conference is the public policy voice for the Roman Catholic Church in Hawaii, which under the leadership of Bishop Larry Silva, represents over 230,000 Catholics in Hawaii.

As many of you know, HFF and the Catholic Church work on a variety of family issues ranging from domestic violence, affordable housing, homelessness, Darfur divestment, children's access to health care, physician assisted suicide and traditional marriage preservation.

What you may not know is that finding families for Hawaii's legal orphans is also a top policy and direct service priority.

As such, HB 1356 HD 2 is among our top priorities because its passage will have a profound impact on the ability of Hawaii's legal orphans to be adopted into forever families – for life. Failure to pass this bill will leave in place an unintended but perverse systemic disincentive that prevents older, waiting orphan children from being adopted.

Please allow me to explain.

Hawaii Family Forum and HOPE In the Name of Christ (INC) foster care and adoption agency have a contract with the Department of Human Services to recruit, train, and support adoptive parents for Hawaii's 'difficult to place' foster children.

These are children whose lives have taken a typically tragic path that looks something like the following scenario:

- They've been abused, neglected and/or abandoned by their birth parents, the very people who are supposed to protect them in life from such tragedy
- Their birth parents parental rights had to be terminated so they would have a chance at a safe and happy life
- They've been in more foster homes than anyone cares to count for more years than any child should ever endure
- They now live in temporary foster homes, waking up every day knowing that they could move that day and knowing that the family with whom they are living with won't adopt them.

These children are usually older and have special needs and challenging behaviors because of the trauma they have been through in their short lives. During the process of trying to find adoptive families for these minors, we have encountered countless cases where foster parents tell us that they won't adopt the minor in their care because "if we adopt, the child will lose the benefits they get by staying in the system as a foster kid." The primary benefit mentioned: higher education.

The failure to extend the higher education benefits to former foster children who get adopted is a policy literally trapping foster kids in the system. The policy operates like golden handcuffs, preventing too many of our foster kids from achieving the permanency and security of an adoptive family.

Let me tell you about a few of the children whose entire lives and futures are being adversely affected by this unjust policy: (Names are changed to protect confidentiality)

- 12 year old Krystal has been in foster care her whole life. Her foster parents refuse to adopt her, opting instead for guardianship because they don't want her to lose higher education benefits. Instead, she is losing her only chance for a permanent, forever family of her own. If we had adoption parity and the benefits followed into her adoptive family, Krystal would have a family.
- 17 year old Joshua's adoptive parents waited to adopt him until he was 18 so that he wouldn't lose his college benefits
- Social workers told us not to bother trying to find adoptive families for the young teens in their caseloads because they don't want them to lose their college benefits: so instead they lost their opportunity to be adopted

We urge you to change this unfair policy.

In addition to supporting the above change, we also support the other provisions in HB 1356 HD 2, increasing the time limit for application for a higher education board allowance and increasing the maximum age for the benefit from 21 to 26 years with a maximum benefit length of 60 months. Given the start these kids have had in life, many need a little extra time to finish their education. It is worthwhile giving them the extra time as higher education is among the key ingredients helping them rise above their traumatic beginnings.

Please support these changes and eliminate this inequity, promoting adoption parity by extending higher education benefits to foster kids blessed to find forever adoptive families.