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Testimony of the Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs

**Before the
House Committee on Consumer Protection & Commerce
Tuesday, February 4, 2025
2:00 p.m.
Conference Room 329**

**On the following measure:
H.B. 1052, RELATING TO THE UNIVERSAL SERVICE PROGRAM**

Chair Matayoshi and Members of the Committee:

My name is Michael Angelo, and I am the Executive Director of the Department of Commerce and Consumer Affairs (Department) Division of Consumer Advocacy. The Department supports this administration bill.

The purpose of this bill is to clarify that the Public Utilities Commission (Commission) under the Universal Service Program may provide and may use funds from the Universal Service Fund to provide free telecommunications access to certain individuals with a print disability.

The Department supports the provision of affordable utility services, including basic telecommunications services for all customers, regardless of their socioeconomic status or location. The Department understands that the intent of this bill is to ensure that individuals with print disabilities continue to have access to time-sensitive information such as state and local government information and public notices, emergency alerts, job opportunities, daily newspapers, and other content, which the Department fully supports.

Testimony of DCCA

H.B. 1052

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While there may be other means to support services for individuals with print disabilities, the Department understands that this bill which clarifies that the Commission may provide services for this segment of our community through the state universal service program, which is existing legislation, will provide the Commission with necessary flexibility to ensure the continuation of on-going services for individuals with print disabilities as envisioned in Act 247, Session Laws of Hawaii 2023.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this administration bill.

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
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Testimony of the Public Utilities Commission

To the
House Committee on
Consumer Protection & Commerce

February 4, 2025
2:00 p.m.

Chair Matayoshi, Vice Chair Chun, and Members of the Committee:

Measure: H.B. No. 1052
Title: RELATING TO THE UNIVERSAL SERVICE PROGRAM.

Position:

The Public Utilities Commission (“Commission”) strongly supports this Administration’s package measure and offers the following comments for consideration.

Comments:

The Commission strongly supports this measure to establish clear authorization and guidance to implement and manage the universal service program and the universal service fund.

The Commission, under the authority granted by Act 247, Session Laws of Hawaii 2023, conducted procurement, signed a contract, and currently administers a program called the Third Party Provider to Offer Assistive Services for the Print Disabled, informally termed Print Disability Assistance Program (“PDAP”). The program provides assistive services for the print disabled that includes a call-in service that converts local text news, periodicals, and job ads to voice for eligible persons. It expands the services that are currently offered through the Ho‘opono Services for the Blind administered by the Department of Human Services – Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (“DHS-DVR”).

The Commission notes that the current contracts contain options for a single one-year extension, which the Commission may execute to allow for time to implement the Universal Service Program (“USP”) and appropriately gather funds in the Universal Service Fund (“USF”). The Commission is in discussions with DHS-DVR to provide access to, or otherwise transfer necessary funds to maintain the portion of the USP that addresses HRS § 269-42 part (b). As is normally required, if the Commission does provide funds to DHS-DVR, the Commission will also assist DHS-DVR in any

procurement efforts to enable selection of a contract provider that will meet the needs of HRS § 269-42 part (b).

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this measure.



STATE OF HAWAII
KA MOKU'ĀINA O HAWAII
STATE COUNCIL ON DEVELOPMENTAL DISABILITIES
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February 4, 2025

The Honorable Scot Z. Matayoshi, Chair
House Committee on Consumer Protection and Commerce
The Thirty-Third Legislature
State Capitol
State of Hawai'i
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96813

Dear Representative Matayoshi, and Committee Members:

SUBJECT: HB1052: Relating to the Universal Service Program

The Hawai'i State Council on Developmental Disabilities **SUPPORTS HB1052**, which clarifies that the Public Utilities Commission under the Universal Service Program may provide and may use funds from the Universal Service Fund to provide, free telecommunications access to certain individuals with a print disability.

Access to essential telecommunications services is vital for individuals with developmental disabilities, particularly those with print disabilities, including individuals who are blind or visually impaired. Reliable, accessible telecommunication services promote independence, enhance safety, and ensure equal access to critical information, such as emergency alerts, public notices, government services, and employment opportunities.

By explicitly authorizing the Public Utilities Commission to support telecommunication services for individuals with print disabilities and enabling the use of Universal Service Program resources, this measure will help address existing service gaps and ensures sustainable funding. This bill strengthens the State's commitment to digital equity and inclusion, empowering individuals with disabilities to engage fully in their communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in **support of HB1052**.

Sincerely,

Daintry Bartoldus
Executive Administrator

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TRISTA SPEER
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
KA HOPE LUNA HO'OKELE

February 3, 2025

TO: The Honorable Representative Scot Z. Matayoshi, Chair
House Committee on Consumer Protection & Commerce

FROM: Ryan I. Yamane, Director

SUBJECT: **HB 1052 – RELATING TO THE UNIVERSAL SERVICE PROGRAM.**

Hearing: February 4, 2025, 2:00 p.m.
Conference Room 329 & Videoconference, State Capitol

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: The Department of Human Services (DHS) supports this administration measure, provides comments, and defers to the Public Utilities Commission (PUC).

PURPOSE: The purpose of the measure is to provide clearer authorization and guidance for the public utilities commission to implement and manage the universal service program effectively, using funds from the universal service fund. The measure aims to ensure access to essential telecommunications services for individuals with print disabilities, including providing free, print-disability-friendly telephonic access to time-sensitive information for individuals who are blind or visually impaired. For the purposes of this paragraph, "time-sensitive information" includes state and government information, public notices, emergency alerts, job opportunities, and daily newspapers.

The DHS Division of Vocational Rehabilitation (DVR) administers state-wide vocational rehabilitation services programs for individuals with physical and mental disabilities, including those who are blind and deaf. These include independent living rehabilitation services for

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individuals with significant disabilities, specialized services for individuals who are blind, deaf-blind and low vision, and the determination of disability claims for Social Security Disability Insurance and Supplemental Security Income benefits issued by the Social Security Administration. DVR recognizes the importance of providing timely and essential information to all community members, including those with print disabilities, in an accessible format. DVR looks forward to the day that State of Hawaii's Universal Service Program and Fund (USF) are authorized and implemented.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments on this measure.

National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii testimony
Submitted by James Gashel, legislative chair

House Consumer Protection and Commerce (CPC) Committee
Thirty-third legislature, 2025 regular session

February 4, 2025, 2:00 pm, hearing on HB1052

Good afternoon Chair, Vice Chair, and members. I am James Gashel, National Federation of the Blind (NFB) of Hawaii legislative chair, strongly supporting HB1052, relating to the universal service program and telecommunications information services for persons with print disabilities. Thank you for considering this important bill and for scheduling this hearing.

HB1052 is part of the governor's package, developed and requested by the Public Utilities Commission. Members of the NFB of Hawaii use and benefit substantially from telecommunications services for persons with print disabilities currently provided through the Commission under Act 253, passed in 2023. HB1052 is designed to continue the current program described more fully below.

This program is all about making information more accessible to anyone with a print disability. Blindness, visual impairment, and learning disabilities, including dyslexia are among the most prevalent forms of print disability. Lack of timely access to information can be a real, day in and day out problem for several thousand residents of our state who can't see or use standard print as their primary form of communication, leaving them at an information deficit. Disabilities, like vision loss, often go with aging and can happen to anyone.

By way of full disclosure, NFB of Hawaii presently fulfills a contract with the Public Utilities Commission pursuant to Act 253. This is a very successful program, funded by an appropriation to the PUC special fund. However, providing information services for persons with print disabilities is also a legitimate responsibility of the Public Utilities Commission's Universal Service Program, analogous to support for telecommunications services for people who are deaf.

Mahalo for considering HB1052, vital to continuing the services described below. Members of the NFB of Hawaii strongly support this bill and hope you will do so too.

**Summary of Free Telephone Service for Residents of Hawaii with Print Disabilities
Provided under Act 253, Session Laws of Hawaii, 2023**

The free telephone service currently available to Hawaii residents with print disabilities offers state and local government information (including public notices) and other information (including current daily newspapers, magazines, emergency alerts, job opportunities, and other timely content) using accessible formats. Accessible formats provide information in an alternative manner or form that gives persons with print disabilities access to information equivalent to access for a person without a disability.

These formats include converting printed information into audio, Braille, or both. This service is available 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

Hawaii publications currently available include the Star Advertiser, Garden Island News, and Associated Press Hawaii. Efforts are currently underway to include additional Hawaii publications, such as The Maui News, as well as a Hawaii Island newspaper.

In addition to local newspapers, Hawaii residents with print disabilities can also access their local weather forecast, emergency weather alerts, and local television listings through the free telephone service.

The local information channel that is part of the free telephone service provides information and announcements from state and local government agencies regarding emergency preparedness, updates on public transit, accessible voting, utility rate hearings, services provided by the Hawaii Library for the Blind and Print Disabled, etc. The local information channel also includes information about local organizations serving Hawaii's blind and low-vision community such as the National Federation of the Blind of Hawaii, Hawaii Association of the Blind, and Travel Vision Aloha.

In addition to local news and information, the free telephone service also provides adults with print disabilities access to over 500 newspapers, including six Spanish language newspapers, and more than 90 magazines. National newspapers available through the free service include the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, and USA Today. Over 100 international newspapers, including Manilla Bulletin, Irish Times, Shanghai Daily, and Japan Times are also available through the free service. Magazines available to adult subscribers include Time, Rolling Stone, The Economist, and AARP Magazine. Finally, in the breaking news category, over forty-four publications are available including ABC, Fox, NPR, Apple Insider, and Science Daily.

In addition to using a touchtone telephone, subscribers can access the content available through the free service using a secure website, smartphone app, digital talking book player, and Amazon Alexa device. Content can be read in Braille using a refreshable Braille display or NLS e-reader.

A limited access account to the free telephone service is also available to children with print disabilities. The service is a valuable resource for leisure and educational activities and provides a restricted level of publications and content specifically structured for children. Publications in the limited access subscription include state publications and state local information channel, Animal Tales, Highlights, and National Geographic for Kids.

In addition to accessing news and information, adult subscribers to the free telephone service can search for job listings on USA Jobs, and Career Builders. Job listings can be searched by zip code, desired income, and education level.