

JOSH GREEN, M.D.  
GOVERNOR  
KE KIA'ĀINA



LEANNE GILLESPIE  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
LUNA HO'OKELE

Phone: (808) 587-5710  
Fax: (808) 587-5734

STATE OF HAWAII  
KA MOKU'ĀINA O HAWAI'I  
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES  
KA 'OIHANA MĀLAMA LAWELAWE KANAKA  
**OFFICE OF YOUTH SERVICES**  
KE'ENA LAWELAWE 'ŌPIO  
1010 Richards Street, Suite 314  
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

April 1, 2025

TO: The Honorable Representative David A. Tarnas, Chair  
The Honorable Representative Mahina Poepoe, Vice Chair  
House Committee on Judiciary & Hawaiian Affairs

FROM: Leanne Gillespie, Executive Director

SUBJECT: HCR 174 HD1 / HR 170, HD1 – REQUESTING THE DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES' OFFICE OF YOUTH SERVICES AND JUVENILE JUSTICE STATE ADVISORY COUNCIL TO EXAMINE THE AVAILABILITY AND UTILIZATION OF AINA-BASED LEARNING PROGRAMS OFFERED TO YOUTH IN THE JUVENILE LEGAL SYSTEM.  
Hearing: April 1, 2025, 2:00 p.m.  
Conference Room 325 & Videoconference, State Capitol

**DEPARTMENT'S POSITION:** The Office of Youth Services (OYS) supports the intent of this resolution as it relates to the Office of Youth Services and offers comments.

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of this bill is to request the Office of Youth Services and Juvenile Justice State Advisory Council to examine the availability and utilization of aina-based learning programs offered to youth in the juvenile justice system.

The Office of Youth Services (OYS) continually analyzes programs and services to ensure it's meeting the needs of at-risk and system involved youth. Additionally, the OYS offers aina-based cultural learning programs through contracts and collaborative partnerships at our

AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY AGENCY

Kawailoa Youth and Family Wellness Center. The OYS further continues its collaborative relationship with the Family Courts to improve programs and services for youth involved in the juvenile justice system. While OYS appreciates the intent of this resolution, performing the specific tasks of this resolution are difficult without additional resources. OYS will continue to focus on its core statutory responsibilities to provide a continuum of services for youth, including cultural-based aina programs.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide comments.



March 31, 2025

**To:** Chair David A. Tarnas, Vice Chair Mahina Poepoe, and Members of the Committee on Judiciary & Hawaiian Affairs

**Date:** Tuesday, April 1, 2025, **Time:** 2:00 pm

**Place:** Via videoconference and Conference Room 325

**From:** Health Committee

**Subject:** Testimony in Support of SCR174, HD1 / HR170, HD1 - 'Aina-based Learning Programs offered to Youth in the Juvenile Legal System.

Aloha Chair Tarnas, Vice Chair Poepoe, and Members of the Committee,

As Chair and Vice Chair of the Health Committee of the Democratic Party of Hawai'i, we strongly support **SCR174, HD1 / HR170, HD1**, which calls on the Department of Human Services' Office of Youth Services and Juvenile Justice State Advisory Council to examine the availability and utilization of 'āina-based learning programs offered to youth in the juvenile legal system.

These programs represent a unique opportunity to address the needs of youth in the juvenile legal system through culturally rooted, community-based approaches that foster healing, growth, and connection to the land.

**Supporting Arguments:**

- **Cultural and Educational Impact:**
  - 'Āina-based learning programs integrate Native Hawaiian cultural values and practices, reconnecting youth with Hawai'i's heritage and instilling a sense of stewardship and responsibility.
  - These programs offer hands-on educational opportunities that build practical skills, self-confidence, and resilience.

- **Benefits to Youth in the Juvenile Legal System:**
  - Youth involved in the juvenile legal system often face significant challenges, including trauma, social disconnection, and limited access to educational resources.
  - ‘Āina-based learning programs provide a therapeutic and empowering alternative, focusing on rehabilitation rather than punishment.
- **Strengthening Communities:**
  - By reconnecting youth with the land, these programs contribute to community healing and a stronger connection to local traditions and values.
  - Empowering youth through these initiatives helps reduce recidivism and promotes a more equitable and restorative justice system.
- **Alignment with State Goals:**
  - Supporting ‘āina-based learning programs aligns with Hawai‘i’s broader goals of promoting sustainability, cultural preservation, and community well-being.
  - The examination and utilization of these programs would ensure that the juvenile legal system embraces innovative and culturally relevant solutions.

We commend this Committee for recognizing the importance of culturally rooted approaches to youth rehabilitation and education. The passage of **SCR174, HD1 / HR170, HD1** will help ensure that youth in the juvenile legal system are provided opportunities for healing and growth through programs that honor Hawai‘i’s land and culture.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this essential resolution.

**Respectfully Submitted,**

Alan Burdick Chair, Health Committee

Melodie Aduja Vice Chair, Health Committee

# Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i

# KAWAIILOA

April 1, 2025

House Committee on Judiciary and Hawaiian Affairs

Hearing Time: 2:00PM

Location: Room 325 via Videoconference

Re: HCR174 HD1/HR170 HD1, Requesting the Department of Human Service's Office of Youth Services and Juvenile Justice State Advisory Council to Examine the Availability and Utilization of 'Āina-based Learning Programs Offered to Youth in the Juvenile Legal System

Aloha e Chair Tarnas, Vice Chair Poepoe and members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i hui, we are writing in **strong support of HCR174 HD1/HR 170 HD1 requesting the Department of Human Service's Office of Youth Services and Juvenile Justice State Advisory Council to examine the availability and utilization of 'āina-based learning programs offered to youth in the juvenile legal system.**

The juvenile justice system disproportionately impacts Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, and African American youth. They are more likely to be arrested and detained, and the fees, fines, costs, and restitution impose financial hardships. Alternatively, youth may be ordered to complete community service hours, but the available opportunities fail to rehabilitate, heal, or reconnect them to their culture and land. Thus, youth remain disconnected and disengaged, increasing their chances of intergenerational trauma and recidivism.

However, 'āina-based initiatives can reconnect youth back to themselves, their 'ohana, culture, and community. Through aloha 'āina, youth learn lōkahi and kuleana, a sense of connection and responsibility to care for the land and others, and reciprocity. When the youth care for the land, they see that the land, in return, cares for them. 'Āina-based education teaches youth critical thinking and problem-solving, communication and teamwork, observation, routine, repetition, and learning by doing. Youth develop stability and thrive when they channel their energy toward something positive, like deepening their relationship with their natural environment, cultivating connections with their community, and acquiring skills to tackle real-world issues. 'Āina-based initiatives are rooted in engagement with land, ocean, air, and all living things. Engaging with the 'āina inspires them to care for their environment and communities like it is their 'ohana and encourage others to do the same. Aloha 'āina also allows youth to learn about, uplift, and perpetuate the practices of their kūpuna, strengthening their families and communities.

Hawai'i is already committed to offering more 'āina-based education and stewardship opportunities for youth healing and rehabilitation, and many non-profit 'āina-based learning organizations are eager to support. HCR174 HD1 acknowledges the healing power of aloha 'āina, requesting that the State offer youth more opportunities to engage in 'āina-based community service. It ensures that the Department of Human Services' Office of Youth Services and Juvenile Justice State Advisory Counsel examines the availability and utilization of 'āina-based youth learning programs and creates and disseminates a list of organizations committed to this work that can be referenced when assigning community service. This bill prioritizes rehabilitating and reintegrating troubled youth through the 'āina, cultivating positive change and growth.

Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i is a collaboration of organizations and individuals committed to reducing the harmful effects of a punitive incarceration system for youth; promoting equity in the justice system; and improving and increasing resources to address adolescent and young adult mental health needs.

We seek to improve the continuity of programs and services for youth and young adults transitioning from minor to adult status; eliminate youth homelessness and housing market discrimination against young adults; and promote and fund more holistic and culturally informed approaches among public/private agencies serving youth.

**Please support HCR174 HD1/HR 170 HD1.**

1099 Alakea Street, Suite 2530 | Honolulu, Hawaii 96813 | (808) 447-1840

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## Hawai'i

Committee: Judiciary & Hawaiian Affairs  
Hearing Date/Time: Tuesday, April 1, 2025, at 2:00pm  
Place: Conference Room 325 & Via Videoconference  
Re: **Testimony of the ACLU of Hawai'i in SUPPORT of HCR174/HR170 HD1**

Dear Chair Tarnas, Vice Chair Poepoe, and Committee Members:

The ACLU of Hawai'i supports **HCR174/HR170 HD1**, which requests the Department of Human Services' Office of Youth Services and Juvenile Justice State Advisory Council to examine the availability and utilization of 'āina-based learning programs offered to youth in the juvenile legal system.

Hawai'i has been at the forefront of transforming our juvenile justice system -reducing the number of youth at Hawai'i Youth Correctional Facility, incorporating trauma informed care for youth and, and recognizing the importance of Native Hawaiian cultural practices and 'ohana to healing and wellness. We will continue this trajectory of decarceration by collaboratively working to implement data-driven solutions across systems.

Of note, a comprehensive study of Hawaiian culture-based education (HCBE) completed in Hawai'i demonstrate that HCBE is positively associated with student socio-emotional outcomes, which in turn support educational and lifelong achievements.<sup>1</sup> The study concluded that students in HCBE-rich classrooms have higher connections to community, a greater sense of belonging, deeper cultural affiliations, increased self-efficacy, and more pronounced college aspirations than their counterparts.

While the study was focused on data from thousands of students, teachers and parents from Hawai'i public schools, state charter schools and Kamehameha Schools K-12 campuses, this is promising data for offering cultural based āina learning programs to youth in the juvenile legal system. **Please support HCR174/HR170 HD1.**

Sincerely,

Carrie Ann Shirota  
Policy Director  
ACLU of Hawai'i

*The mission of the ACLU of Hawai'i is to protect the fundamental freedoms enshrined in the U.S. and State Constitutions. The ACLU of Hawai'i fulfills this through legislative, litigation, and public education programs statewide. The ACLU of Hawai'i is a non-partisan and private non-profit organization founded in 1965 that provides its services at no cost to the public and does not accept government funds.*

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.ksbe.edu/assets/pdfs/Mohala\\_i\\_ka\\_wai\\_Cultural\\_Advantage.pdf](https://www.ksbe.edu/assets/pdfs/Mohala_i_ka_wai_Cultural_Advantage.pdf)

**HCR-174-HD-1**

Submitted on: 3/30/2025 9:51:56 PM

Testimony for JHA on 4/1/2025 2:00:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Keomailani Hanapi Hirata	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Keomailani Hanapi Hirata, and I am an advocate for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System, specifically from the island of Molokai. I stand in strong support of HCR174, to incorporate ‘āina-based learning programs for youth in Hawai‘i’s juvenile legal system. This resolution aligns with our collective kuleana to nurture our youth through culturally grounded, restorative practices that honor the wisdom of our land and ancestors.

**Why ‘Āina-Based Learning Matters**

For generations, Indigenous Hawaiian knowledge systems have taught that the ‘āina (land) is not just a resource but a teacher, healer, and source of identity. Research and lived experience show that ‘āina-based programs:

- Foster healing and accountability, by replacing punitive approaches with connection to place and community.
- Reduce recidivism by empowering youth with purpose, practical skills, and cultural pride.
- Strengthen mental health through activities like lo‘i kalo farming, native ecosystem restoration, and mo‘olelo (storytelling), which reduce trauma and build resilience.

**A Call for Systemic Change**

Hawai‘i’s juvenile legal system must reflect the values of our people. Too often, youth—especially Kānaka Maoli and Pacific Islanders—are cycled through systems that disconnect them from their culture, perpetuating harm rather than rehabilitation. ‘Āina-based learning offers a proven pathway to:

- Restore identity by grounding youth in their heritage.
- Build vocational skills tied to sustainable careers (e.g., agriculture, conservation).
- Strengthen community ties through collaborative, hands-on learning.

**Personal Connection**

As a previous Molokai Youth Advocate, working with our youth that were sent to the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility, I’ve witnessed youth transformed by ‘āina programs—finding confidence in taro patches where classrooms failed them. One young person told me, ‘When I work the lo‘i, I remember who I’m supposed to be.’ This is the power of ‘āina."

**Urgent Action Needed**

HCR174 is a critical step toward justice that is both restorative and rooted in Hawai‘i’s unique

cultural strengths. I urge this committee to:

1. Advance HCR174 and support funding for 'āina-based pilot programs.
2. Center community expertise by partnering with cultural practitioners and local organizations already doing this work.
3. Prioritize evaluation to ensure programs are trauma-informed and effective.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.