



**HB 2043 RELATING TO HIGHER EDUCATION BOARD ALLOWANCE FOR
FORMER FOSTER YOUTH**

House Committee on Human Services & Housing

January 24, 2008
329

8:30 am

Room

The Office of Hawaiian Affairs supports the purposes and intent of HB 2043. Our interest in this legislation is primarily based on our concern that 52% of the children placed in foster care in Hawai`i are of Native Hawaiian ancestry, and when these children reach the age of majority they exit the foster care system without any kind of transitional support that can help them become productive and self-sufficient adults.

We strongly support this measure because many former foster youth are unprepared for the realities of making a living on their own after exiting foster home. These realities, such as finding housing, a means to earn income so you can pay for housing, food and other necessities, can sometimes compound the emotional and physical trauma they suffered prior to and as foster children; leading to feelings of helplessness, despair, and depression, and perhaps, deviant behavior.

If the higher education board allowances are made available, it will make their pursuit of post-secondary education, and the training and skills that it can provide, much easier and attainable.

The funding provided through this bill is a much needed resource that can help former foster youth not only survive but exceed and significantly improve the quality of their lives. We strongly urge its passage.

Mahalo nui loa for the opportunity to present testimony.



E-Mail: HSHtestimony@Capitol.hawaii.gov

Regarding: House HSH Hearing

Hearing on: January 24, 2008 @ 8:30 a.m. in room 329

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Date: January 22, 2008

To: House Committee on Human Services & Housing
Honorable Maile Shimabukuro, Chair
Honorable Karl Rhoads, Vice Chair

From: Kelly M. Rosati, JD
Executive Director, Hawaii Family Forum

Re: **Strong Support for HB 2043** Relating to Higher Education Board
Allowance for Former Foster Youth

Honorable Chair and members of the House Committee on Human Services & Housing, I am Kelly Rosati representing Hawaii Family Forum (HFF), a non-profit, pro-family education organization committed to preserving and strengthening families in Hawaii.

As many of you know, HFF works 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 2043 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 2043, 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.

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB2043
RELATING TO HIGHER EDUCATION BOARD ALLOWANCES
FOR FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

The Legal Aid Society of Hawaii hereby provides testimony on HB2043 Relating to Higher Education Board Allowances for Former Foster Youth, in strong support of the bill.

The Legal Aid Society of Hawaii is the largest non-profit provider for direct civil legal services in the State. Further, since 1996, we have assisted over 2,000 children as guardian ad litem on Oahu, Maui, Hawai'i, Moloka'i and Lāna'i, a significant number of whom have aged out in foster custody.

Based on our experience, we believe that this bill is important to improving the prospects for former foster youth. Currently, former foster youth are at much higher risk than the general population of becoming homeless, incarcerated, involved in violence, or to re-enter the system as parents of abused and neglected children. Higher education board allowances have been a strong step in the right direction towards helping youth transition successfully. Higher education board allowances relieve much of the financial burden of going to college and relieve some pressure on youth to enter the job force with no training and few prospects. Utilization of these payments has helped many youth become successful adults.

Unfortunately, the narrow window on entering the program has left many youth out who would benefit from the payments. Many youth, on turning 18, leave with a desire for freedom and a reluctance to be involved with "the system" or, even more sadly, leave without even knowing what benefits and services are available. After a year or two of "freedom," they realize that they are not capable of surviving on their own—or are faced with homelessness. Expanding this program will enable those youth who didn't go to college or job training programs immediately after exiting to have avenues to escape the poverty that often accompanies a young adult with no training, no skills, and no support system. Passage of this bill will further the goal of transitioning our foster youth and helping them become healthy, productive adults.

For these reasons, we support HB2043.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

M. Nalani Fujimori
Deputy Director



HAWAII FAMILY SUPPORT INSTITUTE

Making Hawaii's Families Strong

January 24, 2008

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Representative Maile Shimabukuro, Chair
Member of the House Human Services Committee
State Capitol Room 406
Honolulu, HI 96813

Re: HB 2043: Relating to Higher Education Board Allowance for Former Foster Care Youth

Dear Representative Shimabukuro:

The Hawaii Family Support Institute strongly endorses HB 2045, which will increase the board allowance for former foster care youth as they pursue post-secondary education, and also extends the period of time for this support within which this degree may be achieved. The purpose of the Institute is to promote best practice to prevent and treat child abuse. This measure represents realistic and very positive public policy in supporting foster youth in achieving financial independence, which is critical to their success in becoming self-reliant members of the community.

The increases in support related to eligibility and duration of support are needed as studies show that it is taking students longer to complete a four year degree due to the need to maintain employment while attending classes, and because students often need to begin in community colleges and transfer to other four year schools. The Department of Human Services has found that current age limits often result in termination of support before a student has completed a four year program. Also, the student for many reasons may not apply for school enrollment immediately upon becoming eligible.

Transition to adulthood and completing a college education is not easy for many young people today, and is surely the most difficult for youth who have experienced abuse, neglect and often multiple foster home placements. This is a time when the youth are most vulnerable to homelessness, drug use and despair. Investment in supports need by youth to help them gain employable skills is simply the most responsible approach we can take. The success of students will be very cost-effective in comparison with the social and financial costs of failure.

In last year's testimony, the Department of Human Services noted that the number of former foster youth participating in higher education has increased over the past several years, and highlighted outreach efforts of their partnership with community youth services. The Department also provides medical coverage and access to counseling services for youth in school. We would like to congratulate this successful collaborative work.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this measure.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Linda Coble". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Linda Coble, Board Member
The Hawaii Family Support Institute.

To: Chair Representative Maile S. L. Shimabukuro, Vice-Chair Representative Karl Rhoads, and all of the members of the committee on Human Services and Housing.

From: Cynthia White, Project Director, Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition.

Re: Bill HB 2043 relating to higher education board allowance for former foster youth

Date: January 24, 2008 at 8:30 am in conference room 329. Three (3) copies including an original required.

I support bill HB 2043 which changes the eligibility requirements to receive higher education board allowances for foster children attending college from a maximum age requirement of less than age 22 to a maximum time period of 5 and ½ years and extends the eligibility beyond one year after leaving care to two years. This is a much needed bill.

As an alumnus of the foster care system, I remember that when I turned eighteen years old I had no intention of ever going to college. I was told that I could not succeed in college. It was two years later before I believed in myself enough to set a career goal and enter college. Now I have a Master's degree and a successful career.

I work with young people who age out of the foster care system and often see that they are not ready for college. They do not believe in themselves, have also received messages that they can not succeed in college, and are anxious about how they are going to survive. They are often emotionally unstable because transitioning out of care is frightening, confusing, and there is not enough support for them.

Some youth are pushed to go to college in order to get the board payments and subsequently fail or drop out because they are not prepared for independent living.

Some youth don't know about the board payments because they have not been encouraged to go to college or considered it as an option. Then years later when they decide they are ready for college, they are disappointed to learn about board payments while seeking funding and that they missed the window of opportunity. Sometimes a young person who is not informed about the higher education allowance doesn't even try to go to college, thinking they can not afford it.

Some youth start college but fail. They struggle with where to live, how to live, and collapse under the pressure. They stop going to school then return a year later after stabilizing their living situation only to learn that they are no longer eligible for board payments.

Foster youths have unique and complex challenges having childhood histories of loss, often abuse and neglect, and early exposure to drug and alcohol abuse. They are vulnerable to the pressures of adult life. There is a high rate of homelessness, unemployment, incarceration, and poverty among Hawaii's foster youth. The board payments are intended to help youth go to college and avoid these pitfalls. The benefit should not be taken away because of time constraints. Foster youth need more time to find themselves, to become stable, to find and develop a support system that will help them succeed, and to identify goals and aspirations.

Please vote in favor of HB 2043 and increase transitioning foster youths chances to succeed in life.

Cynthia White, M.A.Ed.

To: Chair Representative Maile S. L. Shimabukuro, Vice-Chair Representative Karl Rhoads, and all of the members of the committee on Human Services and Housing.

From: Vanessa Melendez-Makimoto, Historian of the Board, Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition.

Re: Bill HB 2043 relating to higher education board payments for former foster youth being heard by the Human Services & Housing on January 24, 2008 at 8:30 am in House conference room 329; 3 copies plus original

Hi, my name is Vanessa Melendez Makimoto and I am 21 years old. I am in my third year at the University of Hawaii. I will be graduating in May 2008 with a Bachelor's of Education.

I am a former foster youth who, at the age of 18, began receiving the state's higher education allowance of \$529 for living expenses. I have about one year left before I graduate from college and will stop receiving the state's higher education allowance.

One of my future goals is to teach in a local elementary school. However, I would like to pursue my education a little further by receiving my master's degree so that I am better equipped to be an effective teacher and so that I will have a greater opportunity for higher pay with my career.

Living on my own, going to school full-time, and working part-time has been a challenge and I know that if it were not for the financial help I receive, I would not be able to do all of it. My part time job is minimal compared to the state's higher education allowance I receive every month and the scholarships and grants I receive for school. If it weren't for these monies, I would not be able to support myself the way I am doing now.

I am supporting this bill in that I would like to see the age limit of 22 years for receiving allowance for former foster youth who are going to school, extend to past that age. Twenty-two years is the age that students are intended to finish a four-year degree, but I know that many students take longer than that for many understandable reasons. Although I am fortunate enough to be able to finish within this time period, I would like to have the option open to me to further my education if I wish, and to know that I can still live independently. Without this help, I am realizing that pursuing a master's degree is unlikely because I will need to begin working right after graduation. I hope that there will be some change in the law so that former foster youth can have more opportunities available to them to advance in their education and to be able to compete with the high demands the workforce has on education.

Please pass Bill 2043 Relating to Higher Education Board Payments for foster youth as it will ensure the success of our state's foster youth.

Mahalo,

Vanessa Melendez Makimoto
P.O. Box 12207
Honolulu, HI 96828
(808) 428-5685

To: Chair Representative Maile S. L. Shimabukuro, Vice-Chair Representative Karl Rhoads, and all of the members of the committee on Human Services and Housing.

From: Blake Lanoza, Youth Outreach Coordinator and President of the Board, Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition.

Re: Bill HB 2043 relating to higher education board payments for former foster youth being heard by the Human Services & Housing on January 24, 2008 at 8:30 am in House conference room 329.

Aloha, my name is Blake Lanoza and I am a former foster youth. I was taken into foster care when I was eleven years old because of a drug abusing mother. I never knew my father. I was placed into a few foster homes and soon ended up being adopted by abusive foster parents. I lived in that house for five years of my life and received beatings that one could only imagine. I was not only physically abused, but verbally and emotionally abused and used for child labor. I thought this was what a normal family was supposed to be like. I ended up being saved after five years because someone from the school turned in my adoptive parents after another foster youth in the same home went to school with a broken finger she got from being beaten.

I found a reason to live shortly after I left foster care. I found the Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition. I decided I wanted to devote my life to changing the system that I thought would kill me because it was so hard to go through. I knew I needed a college degree so I can make a career out of making the lives of foster youths better. I applied for the higher education allowance just two weeks before the end of my one year waiting period. Many youths don't make that deadline. That is one of the reasons HB 2043 is so important.

I was taken from my parents because they could not care for me. Because I was under the custody of the state, I consider the State my parents. Just like many biological parents, the state (my parent) takes care of me. I benefit from the higher education board payment for foster youth. The way it works now is foster youth turn eighteen or graduate and age out of the foster care system. After that, we get 1 year to decide whether or not we want to attend an institute of higher education. Then, if we do decide, we get to have the board payments for four years or until we turn 22. I know that not all youths can finish their four year degrees in four years. It is harder for young adults that are completely on their own to finish in four years. The extra time that the bill provides would help us former foster youths complete our bachelor's degrees or begin our masters.

It is hard to live in a state with one of the highest costs of living in the nation and the lowest unemployment rate. One of my biggest anxieties is worrying about how I am going to survive after the higher education payments run out. I have the good fortune to work full time for the Hawaii Foster Youth Coalition. But that is still not enough to allow me to save for the future even with the higher education allowance. I live from month to month like many people in Hawaii. I am a hard worker, having held two and three jobs at a time so I don't become homeless. I will do any job to make it. But I believe my education is the most important thing. I am grateful to have the higher education benefit. It would help me longer and many other foster youth to stay focused on school and have

food to sustain us and keep the roofs over our heads while we complete our degrees if HB 2043 is passed.

HB 2043 gives the next generation of youths three years to decide what they want to do with their lives. I think that foster youths don't often know what they want to do with their lives right after high school. They are confused, scared, and don't know who to turn to. Higher education payments help youths stay in touch with their support system by having a payee like an independent living program.

Thank you for reading my testimony and having said that, I urge you to not only pass HB 2043, but to advocate for it because it really will lead to a positive change in the futures and help ensure the successes of Hawaii's former foster youth.

Thank you,

Blake Lanoza

TO: Committee on Human Services & Housing
Representative Maile Shimabukuro, Chair
Representative Karl Rhoads, Vice Chair

FROM: Hawaii Foster Parent Association
Judith Wilhoite, Executive Director

RE: HB 2043, Relating to Higher Education Board Allowance for
Former Foster Youth

HEARING: Thursday, January 24, 2008
8:30 a.m.
Conference Room 329

The Hawaii Foster Parent Association (HFPA) is in strong support HB 2043. We believe that by improving the ability of the state to more adequately address the educational needs of youth emancipating from care that more of our youth will enjoy increase earning capacity, delay pregnancy as well as help alleviate our youth experiencing homelessness.

We also believe that one of the greatest hopes for a happy, productive life for our foster youth is for them to attain higher education. This bill goes a long way in helping assure more of our youth have that opportunity.

Thank you for the opportunity to support this bill.

Lisa Ann M. Letoto-Ohata
1485 Haku Street, Honolulu, HI 96819
(808)450-2785, laletoto@hawaii.edu

January 23, 2008

Representative Maile Shimabukuro
Chair, House of Representatives, Committee on Human Services and Housing
Hawaii State Capitol, Room 406
Honolulu, HI 96813

Dear Representative Shimabukuro,

I am writing in support of HB 2043. As a current DHS foster parent, PRIDE trainer, and mentor, I have personally witnessed foster teens "aging out" of our system.

Some of the teens that I have had the opportunity to work with are ready to go on to higher education upon graduation from high school. The current higher education board allowance assures them of being able to and gives them the confidence to succeed. For many others, they are not ready to go directly into higher education and would benefit greatly from the time allowing them to further develop before continuing their education. Many of our foster youth have been through so many transitions that they are still catching up to their peers, both socially and academically, even upon high school graduation.

One of my former foster teens turned eighteen while living with us. He attended a community college for summer school and the fall semester. He would always talk about wanting to graduate with a degree, and he would be the first in his family to do so. At the end of the fall semester, he decided it was too hard, since he was struggling with grasping the basic skills in math and English. He dropped out of school to go to work.

Another one of our former foster teens should be graduating from high school this year. He has aspirations of being a psychologist or psychiatrist. However, he also struggled in school due to many moves and placements. If he also struggles academically and decides to work for a year or two, the passing of this bill would allow him to pursue his educational goals down the road.

I applaud our leaders in taking the steps that are needed to continue helping our foster children. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Lisa Ann M. Letoto-Ohata

cc: Senator Norman Sakamoto, Senate District 15
Representative Lynn Finnegan, House District 32

January 23, 2008

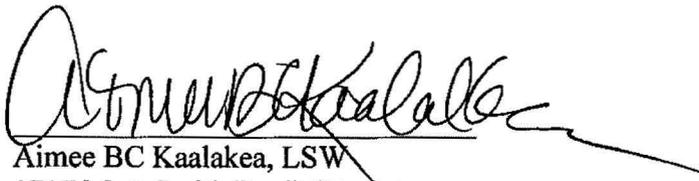
Representative Maile S. L. Shimabukuro, Chair
Representative Karl Rhoads, Vice Chair
Committee on Human Services and Housing
Aimee BC Kaalakea, LSW
Thursday, January 24, 2008

Written testimony in support of HB 2043 Relating to Higher Education Board Allowance for Former Foster Youth.

I am a Licensed Social Worker in Hawaii, and have worked both for the Department of Human Services, Child Welfare Services, and for private agencies. Over the past 10 years I have worked with foster children, foster families, and biological families in a variety of different settings. I strongly support HB2043, Relating to Higher Education Board Allowance for Former Foster Youth, which would give young people who were in the foster care system an opportunity to further their education.

The passage of this bill would make provisions that increase former foster youth's chances of furthering their education. This means these young people have a better chance at success as an adult. As a former Child Welfare Services Permanency Social Worker and having worked in Human Services for several years, I have seen the long term effects former foster youth continue to deal with, even as an adult. Although 18 years of age is considered the "age of majority" childhood issues, problems, and concerns do not stop on the 18th birthday. Higher education gives youth a better chance at success.

The passage of this bill would only serve to give foster children an opportunity to expand their options, furthering their education, and give them an opportunity to improve their chances of success. In consideration of the welfare and education of foster children, I strongly urge the committee to pass HB2043. Thank you for this opportunity to testify.



Aimee BC Kaalakea, LSW
1717 Mott-Smith Dr. #507
Honolulu, HI 96822