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LATE
Testimony

MEMORANDUM

TO: The Honorable John M. Mizuno, Chair
House Committee on Human Services

FROM: Lillian B. Koller, Director

SUBJECT: **H.B. 1354 - RELATING TO CHILDREN**

Hearing: Thursday, February 5, 2009; 8:15 a.m.
Conference Room 329, State Capitol

PURPOSE: The purpose of H.B. 1354 is to appropriate or authorize temporary assistance for needy families funds for the healthy start program, including enhanced healthy start, hiring of additional staff, and training.

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: The Department of Human Services respectfully opposes this measure.

The Healthy Start program has been associated with prevention of child abuse since its inception as a pilot program in 1985. However, a federal review of Hawaii's Child Welfare program in 2003 showed that Hawaii's rate of child re-abuse was no lower than the rest of the nation.

Since that 2003 federal review, the Department has been able to successfully utilize its TANF funding in developing and implementing contractual services that began putting more emphasis on strengthening families and addressing risk factors before they led to abuse. The results of these efforts have been:

- a) The number of children in State care has decreased by half, from about 3,000 children in 2005 to just 1,500 children today. This is the lowest number since 1993; and
- b) Hawaii currently has one of the lowest rates of child re-abuse in the country. The child re-abuse rate dropped from 6 percent in 2003 to just 3.1 percent in 2008, which is far better than the nationally accepted standard of 6.1 percent.

During this same period of time, the Healthy Start program had been experiencing increased reductions in general revenue funding, and as a result a reduced presence in the community.

The Department of Human Services (DHS) firmly believes in the wisdom and cost-effectiveness of supporting poverty prevention programs using our annual block grant of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) Federal funds.

We do not believe that expanding our investment of TANF funds in Healthy Start, a Department of Health program, would be the best use of our limited TANF Federal funds.

It is important to note that Healthy Start already receives about \$1.7 million in TANF Federal funds each year under Act 107, which Governor Linda Lingle signed into law in May 2007. Also, we already invest \$3.2 million of TANF Federal funds in Enhanced Healthy Start, which targets families reported to Child Protective Services (CPS) for child abuse or neglect.

To provide some background, DHS has invested Federal TANF funds in a wide range of family strengthening and positive youth development initiatives across the State for families, keiki and youth. These include programs that help youth succeed in school and prepare for rewarding careers, while deterring substance abuse, truancy, crime and

out-of-wedlock pregnancies. Other TANF-funded programs improve parenting skills and help prevent domestic violence.

All our TANF-funded poverty programs are having a positive impact on reducing child abuse and neglect. Among these programs is Enhanced Healthy Start, which is based on Healthy Start and designed exclusively to help at-risk families who are involved in CPS. DHS provides Enhanced Healthy Start with \$3.2 million in TANF Federal funds each year to promote healthy childhood growth and improve parenting skills and parent-child interactions.

Our investment of TANF Federal funds in a wide range of anti-poverty initiatives is already producing significant results. As cited previously, since 2005, the number of children removed from their biological parents and placed in foster care has declined by half to just 1,500 children – the lowest number since 1993. More importantly, the child re-abuse rate has also fallen by half since 2005, meaning that Hawaii's keiki are now among the safest in the nation.

The success of these anti-poverty programs would be undercut if additional TANF Federal funds are diverted into the Healthy Start program. This would likely, and paradoxically, lead to a rise in child abuse and neglect cases, along with an increase in foster care placements. It should also be noted that Healthy Start, a voluntary program, had greater funding prior to 2005, but the number of foster care placements was rising during that time, along with our child re-abuse rates.

In conclusion, funding for Healthy Start should not come at the expense of anti-poverty programs that are producing significant results. Diverting additional TANF funds would also be contrary to the DHS mission of helping our most vulnerable residents, including at-risk families and children.

The Department also respectfully requests that the \$28.2 million in TANF Federal funds restricted in the current State fiscal year 2009 budget be restored for the biennium so that we can continue to fund the programs, services and benefits that have, among other positive outcomes, strengthened families and contributed to the reduction, by half, of child re-abuse and neglect since 2005. This is neither the time to freeze Federal funds nor divert Federal funds from the investment we have made that is working so well.

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

Good morning members of the committee,

My name is Michelle Pester. While I have a degree in psychology and am a MSW student , I am not testifying today as just a social worker, but also as a woman, a mother and as a resident of Hawaii. Today and every day, I advocate for the rights of all children

I am here to speak for our children, be the voice for these innocents people that can't speak for themselves. The kids of today are the future of tomorrow, we need to make sure that they have a chance of having a good one.

Supporting the Healthy start program will make sure that kids are raised in a better environment

In time of economic crisis cuts are being made everywhere. The result of these cuts can be devastating.

I urge you to make available resources to provide assistance for high risk families and their kids. If our kids are not taken care for now, the future is uncertain and the price to pay for it later is much higher. It is not right to make our kids pay for our mistakes, they deserve the chance of having a good, better, brighter future.

Not too long ago in the mainland there was a murder suicide of a family of 7. Do we need to have a similar case here in order to do something?
When an incident like that happens and we have at least one victim, we have one victim too many. Let's give our children the chance that they deserve. Let's be proactive, not reactive.

The passing of this bill will demonstrate Hawaii's compassion for families in need and the support for our children, our future leaders.

Therefore, I plead to the Honorable committee members to recognize the healthy start appropriation as a compassionate, affordable, cost effective resource for our children and vote to pass this bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this bill.

HB 1354

Late