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MĀNOA

February 5, 2009

Representative John Mizuno,, Chairperson  
Members of the House Human Services Committee  
Hawaii State Capitol, Room 315  
Honolulu, HI 96813

Re: HB 741, Relating to Children

Dear Representative Mizuno

I am Gail Breakey, Executive Director of the Hawaii Family Support Institute testifying in support of HB 791, to restore funding for the Healthy Start program. Healthy Start is a public health approach to preventing child abuse and neglect, and promoting healthy development among infants and toddlers at risk for abuse and poor developmental outcomes. The program is unique and unduplicated in that it screens all families of newborns pre-natally or at birth in hospitals across the state and enrolls those at risk and in need of support on a voluntary basis into the Healthy Start program in their community. Home visiting programs provide a range of family support services to strengthen family parenting capacity and improve outcomes for vulnerable children.

- **It is the only program in Hawaii that reaches out to families providing help right from the start, before abuse or neglect occurs.** Other services are provided after problems have started.
- **It addresses risk factors to reduce risk and improve parenting capacity.**
- **With additional economic stresses on already overburdened families, this safety net for our most vulnerable infants and toddlers needs to be restored.**

There are many reasons why Healthy Start is important and needs to be restored.

**1. Healthy Start is effective in averting abuse, strengthening families and child development.**

- **Less than 1% of children are reported for abuse;** most are reported as threatened harm as a warning and to bring in additional resources for the families.
- A study of children hospitalized for abuse on Oahu showed that **high risk families that did not receive services were hospitalized nearly 8 times more frequently for abuse than those in Healthy Start.** (Kapiolani Medical Center, 1991-1994)
- Children are much safer with home visitors in the home. Potentially dangerous situations are spotted early before abuse occurs or escalates into more serious problems.

**2. Healthy Start is cost effective. Significant costs will result from eliminating the program.**

- University of Hawaii Economist David McClain conducted a study and found **nearly a 3 to 1 cost benefit for Healthy Start** over child welfare and other services involved in abuse/neglect cases. (Blue Print for Change, 1995)
- The Department of Human Services currently estimates that child welfare related costs for high risk families not served preventively are about \$783,888 per family, some studies show higher estimates. **If there had been no Healthy Start services in 2008, short term costs would total at least twice the annual cost of the program.**
- **Averting child abuse reduces costs of many of social problems including** school failure, substance abuse, mental health services,, juvenile and adult crime as well as

**chronic health problems** such as smoking, obesity, diabetes, heart, lung and liver disease, cancer and other diseases which escalate costs of health care. (Felitti, 2000)

**3. Healthy Start is critical to development of human capital. The science of early childhood shows that early intervention services like Healthy Start are critically important in assuring that dis-advantaged, high risk young children do not have adverse early experiences and that they arrive at school healthy and ready to learn.**

- Much research in early brain development show that the experiences in the first years of life lay the foundation for future development, for better or worse. Nobel Prize winning economist James Heckman notes that “while many young children are bathed in an atmosphere that promotes well being and learning, increasing number of children are not.” He states that **we can tell by age five which children will and will not succeed in school and college.** (NYT Op-ed, July 2009).
- Working with high risk families right from the start, Healthy Start helps to stabilize families in situations which are unsafe for a newborn- often parents who experienced abuse or neglect themselves in childhood, often involving substance abuse, domestic violence, a parent with violent temper outbursts, or mothers with no support systems. Interventions are tailored to the needs of the situation. Staff provide encouragement to the parent, and teach parents how to be nurturing and support the developmental growth of the infant. Many families respond well to the opportunity to learn to be good parents. When this does not occur, or when there is real concern for the infants safety, staff make a referral to child protective services usually as threatened harm.
- Fareed Zacaria in “The Post American World” noted that our educational system has fallen behind many countries such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and that the main problem is that too many young children are not prepared to succeed in school-and that we cannot afford to have so many young people unable to compete in a 21<sup>st</sup> Century economy.

**Services like Healthy Start are critical to both reduction in social and economic costs of social and health problems and also to development of human capital Early childhood experts and economists agree that children are our greatest resource and must be protected.**

**There may be differences in the perceptions of child welfare and Healthy Start experience. It should be noted that all of the national incidence studies on child abuse have concluded that cases coming to the attention of child welfare agencies represent the tip of the ice berg of actual cases- ranging from one half to one fifth of actual cases depending on the study. Healthy Start is in the home with families on a regular basis, and is in a position to see, intervene with and report situations that otherwise may not be observed- often until the children get to school. In addition to this, the value of intervening before abuse occurs as previously mentioned is very relevant to early brain development.**

**I would like to close by telling you about one case that for me epitomizes the creative capacity of Healthy Start to work something close to miracles with families.**

**Finally, as Healthy Start programs are actually administered by the Department of Health, it would be appropriate for this bill to be routed to the Health Committee as well as Finance.**

**I hope that you will agree that investing in our most vulnerable infants and toddlers is a critical function and that funding for Healthy Start must be restored.**

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**Sincerely,**

**Gail Breakey, Executive Director  
Hawaii Family Support Institute**