



DATE: February 29, 2016

TO: The Honorable Gilbert S.C. Keith-Agaran, Chair
The Honorable Senator Maile S.L. Shimabukuro, Vice Chair
And the members of the Committee on Judiciary and Labor

FROM: Lisa Dunn, Executive Vice-President and Director of Programs
The Children's Alliance of Hawaii

RE: SB 2112, RELATING TO THE USE OF A DOG IN JUDICIAL
PROCEEDINGS.

POSITION: Strong Support

Chair Rhoads, Vice-Chair San Buenaventura, and Members of the
Committee on Judiciary:

Thank you for providing this opportunity to testify in strong support of SB
2112.

The Children's Alliance of Hawaii believes that each child is resilient, creative, courageous and strong and deserves every opportunity to thrive to their fullest potential. Children who have been traumatized by sexual abuse need special ongoing support to help them become healthy and successful adults. The Children's Alliance of Hawaii is dedicated to providing caring support for children who have been sexually abused, offering hope for the future.

We offer art and recreational therapeutic groups on Saturday for children who have been sexually abused. We have been extremely fortunate in that Pono, Honolulu's Courthouse Dog, needed a bit of volunteer work on Saturdays and so she comes in to our office. Pono was trained by Assistance Dogs of Hawaii and her primary handler is Dennis Dunn with Victim/Witness Kokua. Pono spends time cuddling the children, being a listening ear, and always participating as an enthusiastic group member! The children get to know Pono and Pono knows and recognizes each of them. Some of the children we serve feel lost in the foster care system and came in to group feeling as if they don't really matter to anyone; but Pono's greetings and wagging tail can turn their day around quite quickly.

Pono also reassures the children that everything is alright and "normal."

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They often take their cues from her. She is calm, relaxed, content and generally happy. The children then model her same attitude. We have had several children who have gotten to know Pono through our services and then are later asked testify in court. These children invariably ask if they can have Pono come with them to court. They have told us outright that it won't be so scary if Pono is there, or that they know that they can trust Pono to be honest with them no matter what. Pono provides them with the comfort and security that they crave in a world that has turned their childhoods upside down.

I have also personally been present when Pono was with a child during the sentencing of her abuser. The abused child, her sibling and her family were all nervous wrecks in the waiting area. The family was emotionally divided as the abuser was also a family member. The waiting area was tense and no one was talking or looking at one another. But then Pono entered and the children's face's lit up. They were on the floor snuggling with Pono. Family members started asking questions about the dog and soon they were reminiscing about old family and childhood pets. For a brief time they were a united family again, enjoying each other's company.

They continued to pet and play with Pono as the case was called into court. They all rose and entered the courtroom. Pono joined them. The courtroom was quiet and respectful but some of the tension was gone. Only the courtroom staff, the child, her mother, and Pono's handler were really aware of Pono's presence. Pono quietly lay between the child and Pono's handler. The child would reach her hand down to pet Pono as she became more nervous to speak at the sentencing hearing. Pono remained with the girl, her true and quiet friend.

After the hearing ended and we left the courtroom Pono happily trotted along with the group. It was a somber time as the perpetrator was sentenced to serve many, many years. But all of the family took time to stop and thank Pono for coming. They all recognized that Pono had added that special animal quality that reminds us all of our own humanity.

I could tell you other stories – other child victims and witnesses of sexual abuse, abandoned children at court proceedings, and more. They all were helped through Pono's presence. We should strive to assure that vulnerable victims can readily access Pono or other trained facility dogs. We need to work towards making that access available without bureaucratic paperwork. All vulnerable witnesses should be able to have the benefit of a dog such as Pono during judicial proceedings.

Please pass SB 2112 out of your Committee.