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STATE OF HAWAII
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DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
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TRISTA SPEER
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
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February 9, 2025

TO: The Honorable Senator San Buenaventura, Chair
Senate Committee on Health and Human Services

FROM: Ryan I. Yamane, Director

SUBJECT: **SB 952 – RELATING TO CHILD WELFARE SERVICES.**

Hearing: Monday, February 10, 2025, Time 1:20 p.m.
Conference Room 225 & Videoconference, State Capitol

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: The Department of Human Services (DHS) appreciates the intent of this bill and provides comments. This measure is similar in concept to the Office of Wellness & Resilience's (OWR) administration measure SB1399, which came before this committee on February 5, 2025, and passed with amendments. The major differences between the bills are that this measure adds trauma intervention services and a reporting requirement, deletes the data and referral system and pilot evaluation, the pilot's duration is shorter, and the appropriation is higher than provided in SB1399. DHS defers to the OWR and the Department of Health. DHS respectfully requests that any appropriation not reduce or replace priorities identified in the executive budget.

PURPOSE: Requires the Office of Wellness and Resilience to design, implement, and administer a two-year Child Welfare System Diversion and Intervention Pilot Program to support families and children involved, at risk of involvement, or at risk of reinvolverment with child welfare services. Allows the office to contract with public and private entities to provide necessary services. Requires a report to the Legislature. Appropriates funds.

This measure provides an opportunity to address a protective factor ¹ in the prevention of child abuse and neglect by meeting the concrete needs of children and families and reducing the risk of entering the child welfare system. There is clear evidence that unconditional asset transfers, such as the 2021 Child Tax Credits, resulted in a significant reduction in reports of child abuse and neglect. Other studies ² show that emergency room visits for children went down after families received additional income support.

The proposed pilot program will complement existing diversion services offered by the DHS Child Welfare Services Branch, as well as prevention services with Family First Hawai'i under the Family First Prevention Services Act. These programs provide supportive services to families at risk of involvement with child welfare services by equipping them with the skills and resources needed to create a safe and nurturing environment for their children. This pilot program will include:

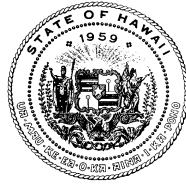
1. **Peer Support and System Navigation** – Families in crisis often struggle to access necessary services. By incorporating trained, trauma-informed peer navigators with lived experience, this program can ensure that families receive tailored guidance and support.
2. **Financial and Concrete Needs Assistance** – Addressing economic instability is crucial in preventing child neglect and family separation. Providing financial resources for food, clothing, housing, and transportation can help families stabilize and avoid unnecessary child welfare involvement.
3. **Trauma-Informed Intervention and Parenting Support** – Strengthening caregiver-child relationships and improving parenting skills through coaching on positive communication, behavior management, and emotional regulation will foster a nurturing home environment to help keep families safely together.

¹ For more on the Strengthening Families Protective Factors Framework, see, <https://cssp.org/our-work/projects/protective-factors-framework/>.

² See, Association of Expanded Child Tax Credit Payments With Child Abuse and Neglect Emergency Department Visits, at <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9936349/#:~:text=Question,and%20neglect%2Drelated%20ED%20visits.>

Investing in this pilot program aims to improve outcomes for vulnerable children and families and prevent reports and incidents of child abuse and neglect. DHS will continue to work with OWR in its development and implementation of the pilot program to ensure that the public benefits participants receive are not reduced by the pilot programs' benefits or services. DHS will also continue dialogue with OWR regarding opportunities to support peer navigators.

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



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**Testimony in SUPPORT of S.B. 952
RELATING TO CHILD WELFARE SERVICES**

Senator San Buenaventura, Chair
Senator Aquino, Vice Chair
Senate Committee on Health and Human Services

February 10, 2025, at 1:20 p.m. Room Number: 225

The Office of Wellness and Resilience (OWR) in the Governor's Office **SUPPORTS** S.B. 952, as the bill presents an important opportunity to assist families at risk of child welfare involvement by providing them concrete supports, peer supports, connection to cultural programming, parental skill-building and training in protective factors that help to prevent child abuse and neglect. The OWR humbly some amendments for the Committee to consider.

In the Report submitted to the 2025 Hawai'i State Legislature, the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group addresses the cascading impact of poverty and the need for concrete supports to prevent child welfare service involvement. Throughout the Working Group meetings and in community conversations, youth and families with lived expertise navigating the child welfare system shared that most families who come to the attention of the current system need support services rather than protective intervention.

A core component of S.B. 952 is the inclusion of trained, trauma-informed peer support navigators with lived experience. These navigators are uniquely positioned to help families connect with community-based services and supports. Peer support programs are particularly valuable because they provide families with access to navigators who understand their struggles firsthand. For children, parents, and caregivers, turning to someone from their own community who has shared similar experiences fosters trust and bridges the gap between families and the services they need, increasing the likelihood that families will follow through on available interventions.

Peer support services have proven to be an effective, evidence-based practice. Since 2007, the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) has recognized peer support services as a reimbursable practice, and many states have successfully incorporated them into their Medicaid plans. While research on peer supports within the child welfare system is still emerging, early findings are promising and suggest that peer support can improve outcomes for families, reduce stress, and enhance overall family functioning.

S.B. 952 also emphasizes the critical need for immediate financial assistance and essential resources such as food, clothing, housing, childcare, and transportation. These provisions are key to stabilizing families in crisis. Addressing basic needs reduces the stressors that often lead to interactions with the child welfare system, enabling parents and caregivers to focus on strengthening their relationships with their children. The program's holistic approach helps families meet both their immediate needs and long-term goals, empowering them to navigate challenges and work toward healthier, more stable futures.

S.B. 952 provides a meaningful opportunity to focus on prevention, early intervention, and comprehensive support for families. By investing in prevention services with a trauma-informed approach, the bill provides additional unique elements that were specifically requested from the Malama 'Ohana recommendations report (i.e. peer support navigators, concrete financial supports, parental skill building and cultural programming).

The OWR respectfully asks the Committee to consider amending S.B. 952 to be a five year pilot program instead of a two year pilot program as it is currently written. We strongly believe we can more effectively assist families through a five year pilot program versus a two year pilot program. In addition to this, the OWR strongly prefers a five year pilot program as we will be able to collect more robust data that can help inform the State of the effectiveness of family strengthening programs that help to prevent child abuse and neglect.

We respectfully urge the committee to pass S.B. 952 and thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important bill.

Tia L.R. Hartsock, MSW, MSCJA
Director, Office of Wellness & Resilience
Office of the Governor

February 6, 2025

To: Chair San Buenaventura, and members of the Committee on Health and Human Services

From: Laurie Arial Tochiki, Co-Chair Mālama 'Ohana Working Group

Re: Testimony in support of SB952

I strongly support SB952 Relating to Family Resilience Pilot Program, which provides funding and authority to establish a trauma informed pilot program to model and test the kind of community based, trauma informed, effective program that will provide the support families need in order to avoid the costly interventions of the Child Welfare Services branch that include removal, foster care, and sometimes permanent financial support for children in permanent placement. The concept of a pilot program based in the Office of Wellness and Resilience takes the next step in creating the kind of child welfare system our community needs and wants.

This bill is very similar to SB1399 and HB1338. We request that these measures be consolidated.

In 2023 the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group was established to develop recommendations to establish a child welfare system that is trauma-informed, sustains a community-based partnership, and responds to the needs of children and families in the system and the community. I serve as Co-Chair of the working group. The working group has completed its work and a full copy of the report can be found at www.malamaohana.net, however the working group is still subject to sunshine law until adjournment sine die. To be clear, the working group will not be making further decisions now that the report has been filed. The working group may meet during the session to provide information to the public about its report but will not make further decisions. Therefore, it is not allowed under sunshine law that more than two of us meet to discuss the report, or next steps. Therefore, I am testifying as a concerned citizen and speaking for the content of the report that was approved by the working group.

Our first task as the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group was to establish an approach to our work by cultivating and modeling the kind of listening and concern that we needed for our working group and modeling the type of child welfare system we hope for. From there, we began with the intense work of interviewing individuals, conducting conversations, and holding group discussions in Permitted Interaction Groups, which helped shape our initial understanding. We then conducted eleven community listening sessions throughout the state, gathering stories and ideas from each community we visited. Perhaps the most emphatic hope expressed was for a system that helps families before crises occur. Community members want clear, accessible pathways for families to get help without fear of punishment or child removal. They envision a network of community-based resource centers (Ka Piko) where families can access concrete supports like housing assistance, food, transportation, and childcare. These centers would offer comprehensive family strengthening programs and universal parent support services that any family could access. Key components of the Ka Piko network would be peer support and assistance with accessing services.

This pilot program will help implement the recommendations of the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group in tangible ways, building upon the mandate of a trauma informed state and the innovative and impactful work of the Office of Wellness and Resilience.

The Pilot Program is a preventative, supportive space that keeps families stable, reduces reliance on government agencies, and offers accessible, community-driven solutions to family challenges. By providing immediate assistance and long-term support, these centers would reduce family stressors, minimize child removals, and help families heal and thrive. We recommend that OWR coordinate its efforts with the initiatives already in place for Family Resource Centers, in order to grow that concept while grounding it in community and lived expert voices. Also, we recommend that the Pilot Program explore opportunities to utilize TANF reserves, and other resources that can maximize the impact of these funds and save money in the future.

We are grateful for your support of the families and children in the child welfare system, and your efforts to find ways to improve the system.

Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i

February 10, 2025

Senate Committee on Health and Human Services
Hearing Time: 1:20PM
Location: State Capitol Conference Room 225
Re: SB952, Relating to Child Welfare Services

Aloha e Chair San Buenaventura, Vice Chair Aquino, and Members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i hui, we are writing in **strong support of SB952, relating to child welfare services**. This bill requires the Office of Wellness and Resilience to design, implement, and administer a two-year Child Welfare System Diversion and Intervention Pilot Program to support families and children involved, at risk of involvement, or at risk of reinvolvement with child welfare services. The bill allows the office to contract with public and private entities to provide necessary services, requires a report to the Legislature, and appropriates funds.

Too often, families facing hardship are funneled into the child welfare system due to a lack of preventative resources and early intervention. The pilot program created by SB952 would help bridge that gap by providing targeted support services designated to keep families intact and reduce unnecessary child welfare interventions, which can be incredibly traumatic for both parents and children. By allowing the Office of Wellness and Resilience to collaborate with both public and private entities, this bill ensures that families have access to a comprehensive network of services, including mental health support, substance abuse treatment, parenting education, and economic assistance.

Further, requiring a report to the Legislature will offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of the program and guide future policymaking efforts to strengthen family preservation and child well-being. The appropriation of funds for this initiative is an investment in the health and stability of our communities, ultimately reducing long-term costs associated with foster care placements and other child welfare interventions.

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 SB952.

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



To: Senate Committee on Health and Human Services
Re: SB 952 Relating to child welfare services

LATE

Hawai'i State Capitol, Conference Room 225 & Via Videoconference
February 10, 2025 1:20PM

Dear Chair San Buenaventura, Vice Chair Aquino, and Committee Members,

On behalf of HCANSpeaks!, I am writing in strong support of SB 952, relating to child welfare services. This bill requires the Office of Wellness and Resilience to design, implement, and administer a two-year Child Welfare System Diversion and Intervention Pilot Program to support families and children involved, at risk of involvement, or at risk of re-involvement with child welfare services; allows the office to contract with public and private entities to provide necessary services; and requires a report to the Legislature. Appropriates funds.

My name is Noreen Kohl, PhD, I am a policy researcher and advocate with Hawai'i Children's Action Network (HCAN), and my work focuses on primary prevention of child maltreatment, which includes economic security to ensure families have what they need not just to survive but to thrive. This bill is inspired by the recommendations of the Mālama 'Ohana working group (see [Final Report and Recommendations](#)¹), and represents a significant step in the right direction towards supporting families by providing them the services and supports needed to prevent involvement or reentry into the child welfare system.

This pilot program is essential to address the gaps in support for families navigating complex child welfare challenges, ensuring they receive the resources and advocacy needed to prevent unnecessary family separation, including peer-to-peer guidance. By providing community-based assistance, the pilot will help families access supportive, stable caregiving approaches, promote child well-being, and reduce the long-term social and economic costs of foster care.

I urge you to please pass this bill to support Hawai'i's families. Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in **strong support of SB 952**.

Kind regards,
Noreen Kohl, Ph.D.
Policy Researcher and Advocate

¹ See the Mālama 'Ohana working group Final Report and Recommendations (URL: <https://www.malamaohana.net/>) and specifically, findings and recommendations of the "Hui Ho'opūlama" or "Systems Supports" Permitted Interaction Group (URL: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/64c47295bf6d88319c76bcde/t/66b2f3d6260d884d777c6aec/172300386226/2024.05.21+MOWG+Hui+Ho%CA%BBopu%CC%84lama+-+Systems+PIG+Pt+2.pdf>).



HAWAI'I YOUTH SERVICES NETWORK

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Judith F. Clark, Executive
Director

Network Membership

Access to Independence
Big Brothers Big Sisters Hawai'i
Bobby Benson Center
Child and Family Service
Coalition for a Drug-Free Hawai'i
Domestic Violence Action Center
EPIC 'Ohana, Inc.
Friends of the Children's Justice
Center of Maui
Get Ready Hawai'i
Hale Kipa, Inc.
Hale 'Opio Kaua'i, Inc.
Hawai'i Children's Action
Network
Hawai'i Health & Harm
Reduction Center
Hawaii Island Community'
Health Center
Ho'ola Na Pua
Ho'okele Coalition of Kaua'i
Ka Hale Pomaika'i
Kokua Kalihi Valley
Kaua'i Planning and Action
Alliance
Lines for Life Youth Line
Maui Youth and Family Services
Na Pu 'uwai Molokai Native
Hawaiian Health Care
Systems
P.A.R.E.N.T.S., Inc.
Parents and Children Together
PHOCUSED
Piha Wellness and Healing
Planned Parenthood of the
Great Northwest, Hawaii
Alaska, Kentucky, Indiana
Residential Youth Services
& Empowerment (RYSE)
Salvation Army Family
Intervention Services
Sex Abuse Treatment Center
Susannah Wesley Community
Center
The Catalyst Group

February 5, 2025

To: Senator Joy Sen Buenaventura, Chair
And members of the Committee on Health and Human
Services

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 952 RELATING TO CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

Hawaii Youth Services Network (HYSN), a statewide coalition of youth-serving organizations, supports SB 952 Relating to Child Welfare Services

I serve as a member of the Hawaii Trauma-Informed Care Task Force. Over the past 3 years, the task force has developed a plan and strategies that will incorporate trauma-informed approaches to services provided to children, youth, and families.

This Child Welfare Diversion and Intervention Pilot Program will utilize peer navigators, an evidence-informed practice, to help families identify needs and access services. It will provide material assistance to support basic needs. By strengthening families, it will reduce the overload of the Child Welfare System.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Judith F. Clark, MPH
Executive Director

February 6, 2025

To: Senator San Buenaventura, Chair, and Senator Aquino, Vice Chair
Senate Committee on Health & Human Services

From: Karen Worthington, Private Citizen

Re: SB 952: Relating to Child Welfare Services
Hawai'i State Capitol, Room 225 and Videoconference, February 10, 2025, 1:20pm

Position: **SUPPORT**

Dear Senator San Buenaventura, Senator Aquino, and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of SB 952, which establishes a two-year CWS diversion and intervention pilot program within the Office of Wellness and Resilience. This innovative program represents a critical shift toward prevention and early intervention that will help strengthen Hawai'i families and reduce the risks of families' involvement with child welfare services.

My name is Karen Worthington, and I am a children's law and policy attorney with a consulting business on Maui, Karen Worthington Consulting. I have worked as a lawyer in and around state systems affecting children and families throughout my 30-year career. I am certified as a Child Welfare Law Specialist by the National Association of Counsel for Children. I have worked extensively with Hawai'i state departments and nonprofit organizations that support children and families who exist at the margins of our society.

Please pass SB 952. This pilot program will strengthen our support for families in several important ways:

- It creates a comprehensive support system that includes peer support navigators with lived experience, who can effectively bridge the gap between families and needed services while building trust through shared understanding.
- It addresses the critical connection between poverty and child welfare involvement by providing immediate financial assistance and concrete supports for basic needs like food, housing, and transportation—supports that can prevent crisis and stabilize families.
- It recognizes, as demonstrated by extensive research, that most families who come to the attention of the child welfare system need support services rather than protective intervention, and it provides those services in a way that strengthens rather than disrupts families.
- It implements evidence-based practices, including peer support services that have been recognized by the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services since 2007 as an effective intervention.
- It responds to new federal requirements under Public Law No: 118-258 (enacted January 4, 2025), which allows states to use Title IV-B family preservation funds for “peer-to-peer mentoring and support programs with demonstrated experience fostering constructive relationships between children and families and mentors with relevant lived experience or interactions with the child welfare system.” (42 USC 629a(a)(1)(G)). Public Law 118-258 also adds a definition of “family support services” which can be provided through Title IV-B funds, providing further support for the pilot program in SB 952.

The conditions that often lead to child welfare involvement - inadequate food, housing instability, lack of supervision while parents work, or untreated medical conditions - are frequently direct results of economic hardship. This pilot program creates a framework for providing appropriate support rather than unnecessarily involving families in the child welfare system.

The Office of Wellness and Resilience is uniquely positioned to develop and implement this pilot project in partnership with DHS and community-based service providers. If you would like additional information related to my testimony, please do not hesitate to contact me at karen@karenworthington.com.

Best regards,

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Karen Worthington". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Karen Worthington

SB-952

Submitted on: 2/8/2025 1:13:19 PM

Testimony for HHS on 2/10/2025 1:20:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Dara Carlin, M.A.	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments: Standing in Support