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GOVERNOR
KE KIA'ĀINA

DEPT. COMM. NO. 419

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STATE OF HAWAII
KA MOKU'ĀINA O HAWAI'I
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
KA 'OIHANA MĀLAMA LAWELAWE KANAKA
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July 6, 2026

The Honorable Ronald D. Kouchi, President
and Members of the Senate
Thirty-Third State Legislature
State Capitol, Room 409
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

The Honorable Nadine K. Nakamura, Speaker
and Members of the House of
Representatives
Thirty-Third State Legislature
State Capitol, Room 431
Honolulu, Hawaii 96813

Dear President Kouchi, Speaker Nakamura, and Members of the Legislature:

Enclosed is the Annual Report of the Hawaii State Youth Commission for the State fiscal year 2026 to the Governor and Legislature, submitted per section 352D-11, Hawaii Revised Statutes (HRS).

Per section 93-16, HRS, this report will be available for electronic review on the Department's website at https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/reports/legislative-reports/. For questions regarding this report, contact Leanne Gillespie, Executive Director, Office of Youth Services, at lgillespie@dhs.hawaii.gov.

Sincerely,

Joseph Campos, II
Director

Enclosure

c: Governor's Office
Lieutenant Governor's Office
Department of Budget and Finance
Legislative Auditor
Legislative Reference Bureau Library (1 hard copy)
Hawaii State Public Library, System State Publications Distribution Center (2 hard copies, one electronic copy)
Hamilton Library, Serials Department, University of Hawaii (1 hard copy)

REPORT TO THE THIRTY-THIRD HAWAII STATE LEGISLATURE 2026

IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PROVISIONS OF SECTION 352D-11, HAWAII REVISED STATUTES, THE ANNUAL REPORT OF THE HAWAII STATE YOUTH COMMISSION FOR THE STATE FISCAL YEAR 2026.

Hawaii State Youth Commission
Office of Youth Services
Department of Human Services
July 2026

The Hawai‘i State Youth Commission
Annual Report
July 2025 – June 2026 (FY2026)

Prepared by

Jeremiah Jacinto, *Chairperson*

Andrew Pōmai Chang, Vice *Chairperson*

Sophie Chan, *Secretary*

Gizelle Rodrigues, *Treasurer*

Mele Kāneali'i, *Legislative Lead*

Mar Heinrich Ruiz, *Education Committee Lead*

Lehua Norris, *Environment Committee Lead*

and Amelia Sofos, *Public Health Committee Lead*

HiYC Mission & Purpose Statement

The Hawai‘i State Youth Commission is a constellation of youth, connected to our past and mindful of our future, who engage in public-policy advocacy through a commitment to inclusivity, opportunity, and progress in Hawai‘i. Our purpose is to advise the Governor and Legislature on behalf of the youth of Hawai‘i.

1. Introduction

Formed eight years ago, the Hawai‘i State Youth Commission (HiYC) has been dedicated to engaging and empowering youth across the State of Hawaii to articulate their voices and perspectives to the Governor and State Legislature on legislative policies, programs, and budgets concerning the youth of Hawai‘i. The 15 HiYC Commissioners, aged 14 to 24, are appointed by the Governor, the Senate President, and the Speaker of the House. Current membership includes representation from Hawai‘i Island, Kaua‘i, Moloka‘i, Maui, and O‘ahu.

This year's main theme was the continued advancement of youth priorities amid a shifting political landscape. Our primary goal was to ensure that youth voices remained represented through meaningful advocacy while expanding the HiYC’s reach and impact. This year, the HiYC testified on more bills than at any point in its history, introduced its first pieces of HiYC-drafted legislation, and strengthened collaboration by engaging with communities across the state through panels, webinars, and public discussions on issues affecting Hawai‘i's youth.

Overall, the HiYC has continued to exceed its goals through sustained collaboration, civic engagement, and legislative advocacy. Commissioners worked together to develop thoughtful policy positions, build consensus across diverse perspectives, and confidently represent the interests of young people throughout the legislative session. By expanding outreach and fostering meaningful dialogue with community members and stakeholders, the HiYC further strengthened its role as a voice for Hawai‘i's youth.

2. Summary of the Term

2A. General Business Report:

The HiYC held regular meetings, biweekly or weekly, on Sundays at 11:00 a.m. HST from July 2025 through the beginning of the legislative session. As HiYC priorities shifted to support legislative advocacy and project implementation, meetings transitioned to a weekly schedule based on HiYC needs, with continued emphasis on the 2026 legislative session. All Commissioners were involved in learning about, collaborating with, and supporting one another through regular virtual meetings. HiYC took concurrent steps forward on multiple levels, including:

- The Aloha Spirit Law, with the values of aloha and mālama at HiYC's core, continued to provide the foundation for members to build relationships, collaborate effectively, and grow as one unified HiYC team/'ohana,
- Commissioners completed essential training to meet the requirements to function as a State Commission,

    - Ethics Commission Training,
    - Communications Outreach Training with former Department of Human Services Public Information Officer Amanda Stevens, and
    - All Hawai‘i State requirements to serve as a commissioner were met
- Commissioners designed, developed, and implemented multiple statewide initiatives that had some of the largest impacts HiYC has seen on Hawai‘i's youth community, including:
    - Youth Financial Empowerment Plan,
    - Climate Literacy Campaign,
    - Pages for Purpose,
    - Youth Civic Engagement Module (in partnership with PAAC),
    - Mālama ‘Āina Initiative, and
    - HiYC Newsletter

2B. Executive Board Report:

The HiYC Executive Board focused on two primary responsibilities throughout the 2025–2026 term: (1) Internal HiYC Administration and (2) Organizational Leadership and Public Engagement. The Executive Board consisted of the elected Chairperson, Vice Chairperson, Secretary, Treasurer, and Legislative Lead.

Throughout the year, the Executive Team redefined the internal administration of the HiYC through substantial amendments to our bylaws, spearheaded by Vice Chairperson Chang. The changes resulted in a reorganization of responsibilities between the Executive Board, Legislative Committees, and Standing Committees. The reorganization redefined the role the Executive Board played in motivating other Commissioners when it came to projects and recruitment, while allowing other Commissioners to pursue leadership opportunities as Committee Leads.

A defining accomplishment of this term was the Executive Board’s commitment to fostering a culture of youth leadership through policymaking. For the first time in the HiYC’s history, Commissioners were encouraged and supported in drafting, introducing, and advocating for their own resolutions before the Hawai‘i State Legislature. This marked an important evolution in the HiYC’s role—from serving primarily as an advisory body to becoming a proactive source of youth-driven policy ideas.

The Executive Board accomplished several significant organizational milestones, including the following:

- Completing comprehensive revisions to the HiYC Bylaws, modernizing governance procedures, and strengthening compliance with Hawai‘i's Sunshine Law,
- Adopting and implementing new internal policies and procedures to improve the HiYC’s operations and establishing a stronger institutional foundation for future cohorts,
- Conducting officer elections and developing comprehensive officer transition documents and leadership trainings to ensure continuity between HiYC terms,
- Continuing to improve the organization, accessibility, scheduling, and culture of HiYC meetings,
- Overseeing the recruitment and onboarding of new Commissioners from a record-breaking pool of exceptional applicants in an effort to maintain statewide representation and fill HiYC vacancies, and

- Overcame significant communication and organization challenges propagated by notable vacancies on the HiYC.

As a passionate and dedicated body of youth leaders, the HiYC met weekly during the height of the legislative session and transitioned to a biweekly meeting schedule as operational priorities shifted throughout the remainder of the term. During FY2026, the HiYC convened for more than thirty-six regular meetings. Members of the Executive Board managed the day-to-day administration of the HiYC by preparing and publishing meeting agendas, minutes, recordings, official correspondence, and facilitating meetings in accordance with Hawai‘i's Sunshine Law and other applicable state requirements.

The Executive Board also emphasized the importance of adaptive leadership and community responsiveness. Commissioners were encouraged to view their projects as living initiatives that could evolve alongside the changing needs of Hawai‘i's communities. Rather than remaining fixed to their original scope, projects were expected to respond to current events and emerging challenges. For example, the **Climate Literacy Campaign** pivoted during the Kona low storm events to provide youth-friendly educational materials on disaster preparedness, severe weather safety, and emergency awareness. This emphasis on adaptability ensured that the HiYC’s work remained relevant, timely, and responsive to the communities it serves.

In addition to strengthening internal operations, the Executive Board completed a comprehensive revision of the **HiYC Communications and Youth Engagement Plan**. Led by Chairperson Jacinto and Vice Chairperson Chang, the updated plan modernized the HiYC’s communications standards, clarified expectations for media engagement and public outreach, and established a stronger framework for representing the HiYC across digital platforms and community partnerships.

The accomplishments of the Executive Board reflect the continued maturation of the HiYC as Hawai‘i's official youth advisory body. By strengthening the HiYC’s internal governance, empowering Commissioners to author and advocate for legislation, and cultivating a culture of responsive, community-centered leadership, the Executive Board laid a strong foundation that will support future Commissioners and expand opportunities for meaningful youth participation in state government.

2C. 2026 Legislative Session Analysis:

The HiYC advocates for youth interests through formal and collaborative engagement with the Hawai‘i State Legislature. During the term, Commissioner Kāneali'i was appointed as the HiYC’s Legislative Lead, coordinating legislative tracking and advocacy efforts throughout the legislative session. Building on the HiYC’s established priorities, the Legislative Committees monitored legislation, collaborated with community partners, and supported policies that promote the health, safety, and well-being of Hawai‘i’s youth.

During the 2026 Regular Session, lawmakers introduced 2,459 bills, with 268 bills passing the Legislature. Governor Josh Green approved the majority of these measures, including the two-year state budget allocating more than $10 billion annually, while announcing plans to veto four bills. Throughout the session, the HiYC tracked 58 pieces of legislation. Of the measures tracked, five priority bills were enacted into law, two HiYC-authored resolutions were adopted, while two additional resolutions did not pass.

The HiYC supported several significant legislative measures that became law, including legislation requiring the Department of Education to implement dyslexia-sensitive, linguistically appropriate universal screenings and evidence-based literacy interventions; expanding protections for individuals seeking gender-affirming health care services; providing funding to strengthen domestic violence support within the Child Welfare Services Branch; authorizing community co-management agreements for public lands; and protecting safe access to health care facilities by prohibiting interference with patients and providers.

In addition to tracking legislation, the HiYC authored and advanced two resolutions that were successfully introduced into the legislature. The first one encouraged the expansion of peer-to-peer mental health support programs in schools to improve student well-being and access to early mental health support. The HiYC also introduced a resolution reinforcing continued access to mifepristone for reproductive health care, affirming the importance of maintaining access to evidence-based reproductive health services throughout Hawai‘i. The 2026 legislative session demonstrated the HiYC’s continued commitment to meaningful youth advocacy. Through legislative tracking, testimony, collaboration with community organizations, and the successful advancement of HiYC priorities, members strengthened their understanding of the legislative process while contributing to policy discussions that support Hawai‘i's youth and communities.

2D. Legislative Committees Report:

A. Education Legislative Committee - Mar Heinrich Ruiz, Committee Lead

The 2026 Legislative Session presented meaningful opportunities for the Education Committee to advocate for policies that improve educational experiences and the well-being of Hawai’i’s youth. Throughout the session, the committee tracked 15 bills and resolutions spanning a variety of education-related priorities, from expanding student resources to strengthening support systems and creating more equitable opportunities for students across the state.

Of the 15 measures tracked, one bill successfully passed and was enacted into law, while two resolutions were adopted in their final form by the Legislature. Although the remaining measures did not advance every stage of the legislative process, the committee remained actively engaged by monitoring legislation, submitting testimony, collaborating with legislators and community partners, and advocating for the priorities identified by Hawai’i’s youth. The passage of three committee measures reflects the growing impact of youth voices in the legislative process and provides a strong foundation for future advocacy efforts.

B. Environment Legislative Committee - Lehua Norris, Committee Lead

Over the course of the 2026 Hawai’i Legislative Session, the environment committee tracked 21 bills. The committee supported legislation that aimed to address a variety of issues in relation to the environment–environmental education in both K-12 and the University of Hawaii system; direct protection of land and water systems; the establishment of new environment programs; increased accessibility and accountability for existing bodies; financial incentives that encourage citizens to make environmentally-friendly choices.

At the beginning of the legislative session, our first waves of bills either did not receive committee hearings or did not pass committee votes. Members worked efficiently to communicate with the various legislative committees' leadership in hopes of influencing a path forward for the measures but ultimately sought replacements for any bill that had not advanced. This process of advocacy and replacement continued until the final hearings of crossover, where the committee ultimately focused their efforts on advocating three bills: SB 2110 Relating to Agriculture, HB 2218 Relating to the Department of Land and Natural Resources, and HB 2101 Relating to Commercial Aquariums. Out of these three bills, only SB 2110 and HB 2218 were scheduled for conference meetings.

House Bill 2218, Relating to the Department of Land and Natural Resources, was transmitted to the Governor's Desk. As of June 30, 2026, the bill has yet to be signed by Governor Green. The content of this measure creates an avenue for public lands to be managed by communities or via co-management agreements with the Board of Land and Natural Resources. This expansion of stewardship would allow for an increase in effective support.

The passage of the federal One Big Beautiful Bill Act in 2025 contains language that chips away at existing environmental safeguards and the creation of new protections via condemnation and budget cuts. These highly influential federal actions may have greatly impacted the success rate of this year's environment-related bills in not only the Hawai'i State Legislature, but state legislative bodies across the nation. Regardless, the environment committee has remained a steadfast force of advocacy for a cleaner, greener world.

C. Public Health Legislative Committee - Amelia Sofos, Committee Lead

Over the 2026 legislative session, the Public Health Committee tracked 6 priority measures and monitored an additional 7 backup and inactive measures related to public health, mental health, child welfare, and health equity. The Committee's priority legislation focused on protecting access to reproductive and gender-affirming health care, strengthening food security through the Hawai‘i Farm to Families Program, improving domestic violence screening and support within Child Welfare Services, and urging the Department of Health to coordinate the stockpiling of mifepristone. The Committee also monitored legislation addressing youth mental health services, rural health access, family court improvements, youth homelessness, community health workers, and sex trafficking prevention.

Throughout the session, the Public Health Committee submitted testimony, monitored hearings, and engaged in advocacy to support legislation that promoted the health, safety, and well-being of Hawai‘i's youth. Although not all priority measures advanced through the legislative process, the Committee remained actively engaged in advocating for expanded access to health care, improved mental health resources, stronger protections for vulnerable youth, and policies that advance health equity across the state.

Throughout the 2026 Legislative Session, Committee Leads were responsible for tracking legislation they deemed pertinent to their respective priority. Committee Leads could develop "legislative packages" of the bills they were tracking and come to the HiYC for approval to submit testimony. The HiYC then voted to support or refuse the legislative package, with the option of amending the packages to exclude specific bills. As the

legislative session went on, the Committee Leads proposed additional bills for support/opposition by the HiYC. Committee Leads tracked the following bills and resolutions throughout the session (Table 1):

Table 1. Chart of bills and resolutions tracked during the 2026 Legislative Session.

Education	Public Health	Environmental
i. HB1891	i. HB1961	i. SB2110
ii. HR94	ii. SB2845	ii. HB1621
iii. HCR102	iii. HB2208	iii. HB2218
iv. SR43	iv. HB1875	iv. HB2101
v. SCR44	v. SB2868	v. SB2535
vi. HR177	vi. HB1801	vi. HB1953
vii. HCR187	vii. SR44	vii. SB3296
viii. HB1887	viii. SCR45	viii. SB2103
ix. HB1779	ix. HR37	ix. HB1925
x. HB1561	x. HCR39	x. HB2030
xi. HB1811	xi. HB1537	xi. SB2691
xii. SB2833	xii. SB2898	xii. HB1774
xiii. SB1404	xiii. HB1564	xiii. SB2440
xiv. HB1085	xiv. SB2679	xiv. HB1949
xv. SB9	xv. HB1565	
xvi. HB2427	xvi. SB1004	
xvii. HB1676	xvii. HB688	
xviii. HB2168	xviii. SB453	
xix. SB87	xix. HB2560	
xx. HB842	xx. HB1706	
xxi. SB1010	xxi. SB2089	

Education	Public Health	Environmental
xxii. HB758		
xxiii. SB64		

The legislative Committees, led by Legislative Lead Kāneali'i, were major policy drivers of the HiYC. It was tasked with maneuvering through the workings of Hawai‘i’s government throughout its fifth year. We were tasked with creating training for Commissioners about the basics of the Hawai‘i State Legislature and how a bill becomes law before we could even select bills, we wanted to support or oppose.

2E. Projects Report:

The HiYC is dedicated not only to advocating for key legislation and advising policymakers but also seeks to interact with and hear from youth on issues important to them. During this past term, nearly every Commissioner created and led their own projects to build meaningful relationships with community organizations, government leaders, nonprofit partners, and youth-serving programs across Hawai‘i. Through collaboration and outreach, the Commissioners worked to expand opportunities for youth engagement, strengthen community partnerships, and support the HiYC’s mission of amplifying youth voices. During the term, Commissioners focused on developing new partnerships and leading collaborative initiatives that addressed issues important to Hawai‘i's youth.

Key accomplishments included:

- Partnered with local legislators and nonprofit organizations to develop and host a Climate Literacy and Disaster Prevention Webinar Series. The series provided young people with educational resources on climate resilience, disaster preparedness, and the importance of civic engagement in addressing environmental challenges,
- Collaborated with the PAAC Pacific Asian American Council on a joint community project that fostered youth leadership, cultural connection, and civic participation through partnership with community stakeholders,
- Organized and hosted a Mālama ‘Āina service event in partnership with a local community organization. Commissioners worked alongside volunteers to support environmental stewardship while strengthening relationships with community partners and encouraging youth involvement in mālama ‘āina efforts, and
- Publishing of the HiYC Newsletter to promote the HiYC’s accomplishments and accolades.

Through these initiatives, the Commissioners expanded the HiYC’s network of partners, created new opportunities for youth engagement, and reinforced HiYC’s commitment to collaboration, leadership development, and community service.

3. Future Goals

Strengthened Community Partnerships and Disaster Recovery Efforts: The HiYC expanded collaboration with local organizations, nonprofit partners, and government agencies to support youth-centered recovery efforts following the Kona Low storms. The HiYC connected young people with volunteer opportunities, recovery resources, and community initiatives while advocating for youth perspectives in long-term resilience planning. The following are some of the top priorities for the HiYC for FY2027:

- Expanded Collaboration with Youth Policy and Leadership Organizations: the HiYC strengthened relationships with youth-serving organizations across Hawai‘i to exchange ideas, share best practices, and increase opportunities for collaboration. This included building stronger connections with organizations such as the Transportation Council, the Center for Tomorrow's Leaders, the Pacific and Asian Affairs Council, the Climate Future Forum, and other youth leadership and civic engagement groups to better understand emerging youth priorities and strengthen statewide advocacy.
- Advanced Youth Civic Engagement and Legislative Advocacy: HiYC deepened its involvement in the legislative process by engaging with legislators and state agencies throughout the year, preparing earlier for the legislative session, and increasing youth participation in policy discussions. The HiYC continued developing testimony, monitoring legislation affecting young people, and identifying opportunities to advance youth-informed policy recommendations.
- Expanded Statewide Youth Outreach: The HiYC continued building relationships with public, charter, and private schools, youth organizations, and community groups across the state to ensure a broader range of youth voices was represented. Special emphasis was placed on reaching rural, neighbor islands, and historically underrepresented communities through educational programming, service projects, and listening sessions.
- Supported Leadership Transition and Organizational Development: The HiYC supported a smooth transition for the newly elected Executive Board while continuing to strengthen institutional knowledge, leadership development, and member engagement throughout the term.
    - The Executive Board for the 2026–2027 HiYC Term:
        - Chairperson: Mar Heinrich Ruiz
        - Vice Chairperson: Lehua Norris
        - Secretary: Vivienne Hill
        - Treasurer: Amelia Sofos
        - Legislative Lead: Mele Kāneali'i

4. Conclusion

The HiYC continued its upward trajectory during the past term, building upon previous successes while reaching new milestones in youth advocacy, civic engagement, and organizational development. Throughout the year, Commissioners demonstrated that young people are not only capable of contributing to important policy discussions but can also serve as effective leaders, educators, and advocates within their communities. This year marked the most active legislative session in the HiYC’s history. Commissioners testified on a record number of bills, created the first HiYC-drafted legislation, and strengthened relationships with lawmakers

through meaningful collaboration. These efforts reinforced HiYC's role as Hawai‘i's official youth advisory body and expanded opportunities for youth perspectives to shape public policy.

Beyond the Legislature, Commissioners broadened the HiYC’s statewide impact through innovative educational initiatives and community partnerships. Projects promoting financial literacy, climate literacy, civic engagement, environmental stewardship, and youth leadership reached students and community members across Hawai‘i. The HiYC also partnered with legislators, nonprofit organizations, and community groups to host educational webinars, service projects, and public discussions that empowered young people to become more informed and engaged citizens. The HiYC also demonstrated the importance of responsive leadership during times of need. As communities across the state experienced the impacts of the Kona low storms, Commissioners adapted existing initiatives to include disaster preparedness education while strengthening partnerships with local organizations supporting recovery efforts. This flexibility reflected the HiYC’s commitment to addressing emerging challenges while remaining focused on the needs of Hawai‘i's youth.

Internally, the HiYC continued to mature as an organization through significant improvements to its governance, operations, and leadership development. Comprehensive revisions to the HiYC’s Bylaws, updated communications standards, and strengthened transition planning established a stronger foundation for future Commissioners. These efforts led to the record-breaking pool of applicants to join the HiYC and ensure that the HiYC will continue to grow as a sustainable and effective voice for young people across the state.

As the HiYC looks toward the coming term, it remains committed to expanding youth engagement, strengthening partnerships with community and government leaders, and creating meaningful opportunities for young people to shape the future of Hawai‘i. The accomplishments of this fiscal year demonstrate that when youth are empowered with the tools, support, and platform to lead, they can create lasting and meaningful change for their communities.