

JAN 23 2026

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## A BILL FOR AN ACT

RELATING TO CHILD WELFARE SERVICES.

**BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF HAWAII:**

1 SECTION 1. The legislature finds that the malama ohana  
2 working group established by Act 86, Session Laws of Hawaii  
3 2023, was tasked with recommending transformative changes to the  
4 State's existing child welfare system. For fifteen months, the  
5 seventeen working group members, who represented those serving  
6 youth, as well as youth and families throughout the State,  
7 together with hundreds of community members, opened their hearts  
8 and listened deeply to the stories of lived experience in the  
9 child welfare system. They worked to develop recommendations to  
10 establish a child welfare system that is trauma-informed,  
11 sustains a community-based partnership, and responds to the  
12 needs of children and families in the system and the community.

13 The legislature further finds that the result of this work  
14 was a powerful vision for transforming how Hawaii supports  
15 families and protects children. Among the many recommendations  
16 to move toward this vision was to strengthen the family court  
17 process for child welfare cases. This would include reducing



1      delays in court proceedings, using specialty courts where  
2      applicable, and ensuring access to excellent legal  
3      representation for relatives of youth in the system as well as  
4      for the youth themselves. Some youth reported feeling they were  
5      given no information about their case and their family and that  
6      they were left out of the decision-making process. They claimed  
7      they were disregarded when they reported that they were unsafe  
8      and did not feel their rights were protected.

9           Accordingly, the purpose of this Act is to establish and  
10      appropriate funds for a working group to improve family court  
11      processes, including access to legal representation for youth in  
12      the child welfare system.

13           SECTION 2. (a) There is established within the judiciary  
14      for administrative purposes a working group for legal services  
15      for youth in the child welfare system.

16           (b) The working group shall:

17           (1) Review and consider pathways for implementation of  
18           recommendations of the malama ohana working group,  
19           established pursuant to Act 86, Session Laws of Hawaii  
20           2023, as they relate to the court process, including  
21           counsel for youth; and



9 (1) One district family court judge of the first circuit  
10 and one district family court judge from any other  
11 circuit, who shall serve as co-chairs and invite the  
12 additional members to participate in the working group;

13 (2) A supreme court justice or the justice's designee;

14 (3) Members of the judiciary who served or currently serve  
15 on the child welfare court calendar;

16 (4) A representative from the family law division of the  
17 department of the attorney general;

18 (5) A representative from the department of human services  
19 child welfare services branch;

20 (6) A representative who serves as a guardian ad litem in  
21 child welfare cases;



1 (7) A representative from the William S. Richardson school  
2 of law at the university of Hawaii at Manoa;

3 (8) Two representatives of the malama ohana working group,  
4 who shall be designated by the co-chairs of the malama  
5 ohana working group;

6 (9) A representative from the HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth  
7 Leadership Boards of the HI H.O.P.E.S. Initiative  
8 under EPIC 'Ohana, Inc.;

9 (10) Three or more experts with lived expertise in  
10 navigating the state child welfare system while  
11 minors; and

12 (11) A parent with lived experience in the state child  
13 welfare system.

14 (d) The working group shall submit a report of its  
15 findings and recommendations, including any proposed  
16 legislation, to the legislature no later than twenty days prior  
17 to the convening of the regular session of 2028. The report  
18 shall include plans for a pilot program to test a model for  
19 delivering counsel services to youth of a selected age range in  
20 a selected jurisdiction within the State.



3 SECTION 3. There is appropriated out of the general  
4 revenues of the State of Hawaii the sum of \$ or so  
5 much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2026-2027 for  
6 the working group established pursuant to this Act, including  
7 for the members of the working group to make site visits and to  
8 assist with the report drafting.

9           The sum appropriated shall be expended by the judiciary for  
10   the purposes of this Act.

**11** SECTION 4. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2026.

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INTRODUCED BY: *Karl Rhodes*



S.B. NO. **2678**

**Report Title:**

Keiki Caucus; Judiciary; Child Welfare System; Legal Services for Youth; Working Group; Appropriation

**Description:**

Establishes a working group within the Judiciary to improve family court processes, including access to legal representation for youth in the child welfare system. Appropriates funds for the working group.

*The summary description of legislation appearing on this page is for informational purposes only and is not legislation or evidence of legislative intent.*

