The Judiciary, State of Hawai‘i
Ka ‘Oihana Ho‘okolokolo, Moku‘āina ‘o Hawai‘i

Testimony to the Thirty-Third State Legislature, 2026 Regular Session

House Committee on Finance
Representative Chris Todd, Chair
Representative Jenna Takemouchi, Vice Chair

Wednesday, February 25, 2026 at 2:00 p.m.
Hawai‘i State Capitol, Conference Room 308

by

Dyan M. Medeiros
Senior Judge, Deputy Chief Judge
Luna Kānāwai ‘Ohana Nui
Family Court of the First Circuit
‘Aha Ho‘okolokolo ‘Ohana o ke Ka‘apuni ‘Ekahi

WRITTEN TESTIMONY ONLY

Bill No. and Title: House Bill No. 1565, H.D. 2, Relating to Child Welfare Services

Purpose: 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.

Judiciary's Position:

The Judiciary supports House Bill No. 1565, H.D. 2, and the creation of a working group. The Judiciary appreciates and supports the most recent amendments made by the House Committee on Judiciary & Hawaiian Affairs, which includes an unspecified allocation for a working group facilitator and paid compensation for working group members with lived experience.

Given those additional resources, the Judiciary requests a total appropriation of **$140,000** to cover expenses including, but not limited to, group members going on site visits, assistance

with report writing, a working group facilitator, and paid compensation for working group members with lived experience invited pursuant to subsection (c)(8) and (9) of section 2 of the measure, based on the following breakdown:

Site Visits:	$10,000
Report Writing:	$42,000
Facilitation:	$70,000
Working Group Members with Lived Experience:	$18,000[1]

We respectfully request that any appropriation provided not supplant the Judiciary's existing funding or budget requests.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this matter.

[1] This amount assumes the involvement of 8 individuals with lived experience to ideally get representation from all Judicial Circuits.

Written Testimony in Support of House Bill 1565/HD2 Relating to Child Welfare Services

Natalece Washington, JD, Policy Counsel, National Association of Counsel for Children

House Finance Committee

February 25, 2026

Chair Todd and Members of the House Finance Committee:

The National Association of Counsel for Children (NACC)[1] strongly supports HB 1565. NACC endorses **counsel for youth** and client-directed legal representation for all children and youth in foster care. Appointing counsel for youth promotes judicial consideration of their perspective, empowers youth, contributes their input to life-changing decisions, and improves their perception of fairness in court proceedings.

NACC is very pleased that legislators, guided by the recommendations of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group, are considering the establishment and appropriation of funds for a working group to study the impact of children's legal representation. This is a positive step towards lasting change in Hawaiʻi's child welfare system *directly* inspired by community members with personal experience within foster care.

Funding Children's Legal Representation

The federal government promotes and funds counsel for youth. In 2017, the U.S. Children's Bureau (CB), the federal agency responsible for child protection, issued an Information Memorandum that encouraged the appointment of high-quality child attorney's as "critical to a well-functioning child welfare system." In 2018, CB changed longstanding policy to open Title IV-E federal entitlement funding to support legal representation of children. (This change was codified in federal regulation in 2024). In 2021, the CB issued another Memorandum again urging legal representation for children in all stages of child welfare proceedings and maximizing allowable Title IV-E funds. **In Hawaii these funds remain untapped but are available to supplement state funds to support the appointment of counsel for youth.**

The Current Issue and Opportunity

Currently, state law requires the appointment of a guardian *ad litem* (GAL) for all children and youth in child protection proceedings. (Haw. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 587A-16(c) (6)). Youth may request an attorney if they disagree with the recommendations of their GAL. But there is no right to have an attorney appointed. (Haw. Rev. Stat. Ann. § 587A-3.1(b) (4)). Without an attorney, a child's

[1] Founded in 1977, NACC led the evolution of children welfare law from a cause to a profession by establishing it as a specialty practice requiring distinctive training, skill, and support.

specific wishes may go unchampioned in court. The GAL is distinctly different from counsel for youth. The GAL must develop an informed opinion about what is best for a child and then advance that best-interest determination in court. But what is "best" is a subjective assessment. It leaves the GAL at risk for assessing situations according to their own values and experiences, which may be starkly different than those of the child and family involved in the court proceedings. This can leave the judge without complete evidence on the child's perspective.

By contrast, counsel for youth allow the child-client to set case objectives with the ongoing support and counseling of an attorney who helps them understand their legal rights and the court proceedings. Counsel for youth owe the child the same duties of professional responsibility (loyalty, confidentiality, competence, etc.) as would be due to an adult-client. Counsel for youth zealously pursue the client's agenda—an agenda developed by the child's lived experience and understanding of their own family.

The Research Supporting Children's Legal Representation

Children appointed counsel for youth experience better results than those who are not, including less time in foster care or group settings, shorter time to adoption or guardianship, and more successful reunifications. Studies have found that children represented by counsel for youth are 45% more likely to reunify with their biological parents, 30% less likely to change placements while in care, and 65% less likely to unnecessarily change schools. **Faster permanency and better outcomes for children means cost savings[2] for the state.**

What Say Youth?

Youth with lived experience in the child welfare system overwhelmingly indicate a desire to be seen, heard, and represented. Those appointed counsel for youth can meaningfully contribute to the decision-making processes that have long-term impact on their lives. They can tell their attorney where they are safe and where they are not, who they hope to visit and who they do not, their concerns about their siblings and parents, and any issues they are experiencing in foster care. Their attorney, in turn, must zealously protect their legal rights, ensure their opportunity to participate fully in court, and increase youth access to justice and fairness.

Why Vote Yes

The proposed work group is a practical step to select the best course of action to implement youth right to counsel in child protection proceedings. NACC applauds Hawai'i's ongoing dedication to improving the experience and outcomes for children and youth in the child protection system. We welcome the opportunity to assist the workgroup in meeting its objectives of examining counsel for

[2] A study released in January 2026 found that "using conservative assumptions, the estimated annual federal cost of providing legal representation is $1,009 per IV-E-eligible child, while the estimated annual savings from reduced time in care are between $4,393 and $8,238 per child, yielding a net federal benefit of $3,384 to $7,229 per represented IV-E-eligible child per year" and "estimated federal savings of between $67.96 million and $145.16 million per year." Notably, the savings would be even more significant when accounting for other federal streams (IV-B, TANF, etc.) and parent representation as well.

youth models in other jurisdictions and identifying best practices for statewide implementation. We urge you to support HB 1565.

Sincerely,

Natalece Washington
Policy Counsel
National Association for Counsel for Children
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National Center for Youth Law

TO: Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, members of the House Committee on Finance
FROM: Dana Matsunami, Child Welfare Attorney at the National Center for Youth Law
RE: Testimony in support of HB 1565 Relating to Child Welfare Services

Aloha e Committee Members,

My name is Dana Matsunami, I am an attorney at the National Center for Youth Law where I focus on issues relating to foster care in our state. I am testifying in support of HB 1565, which creates a working group to explore and advance youth in foster care's access to meaningful legal representation in their child welfare case.

In my work, I have had the privilege of collaborating with current and former foster youth throughout Hawai'i to hear their stories, challenges, and visions for a better future. These conversations are not easy. Youth have shared harm they experienced during their child welfare case and the lasting impact on their lives. There are themes: many share that they were left in the dark about their case; experienced abuse while in foster care but feared retaliation if they sought help; and had vital decisions made about their lives without their knowledge or input, causing lasting trust issues and trauma. We know from the brave personal stories of youth, the tragedies that have occurred in our state, and the hard work of community partners that youth in Hawai'i's foster care system can experience terrible–sometimes tragic–outcomes. We also know that child welfare interventions overwhelmingly disrupt the lives of Native Hawaiian families. It is, as one former Hawai'i foster youth put it, "a system of luck," where some get lucky and escape the worst outcomes, but many do not.

Children and youth have legal rights while in foster care, including a right to family integrity, community connection, and safety. However, under current state, youth in Hawai'i can be removed from their families, communities, and homes; separated from siblings; placed in state custody; prevented from attending extracurricular activities; forced to change schools; permanently legally severed from their parents; and more, all without a lawyer or an advocate who is required to advocate for what the youth wants and needs. Advancing effective, culturally-responsive, and well-trained legal representation to youth in child welfare cases is an essential step to ensuring youth voices are heard and that their rights are upheld. As one youth said, "how can you make decisions that change our lives forever without ever even hearing from us?"

The importance of youth representation in child welfare cases is backed up by research. Access to counsel makes a world of difference: children represented by specifically trained legal counsel are 40% more likely to leave the foster system within their first six months and experience a 45% higher reunification rate with their biological parents. They also experience a 30% reduction in the rate of placement moves, and 65% reduction in the rate of unnecessary school moves.

By creating a working group–guided by youth lived experts–to explore a model of representation that serves Hawai'i's unique legal and cultural needs, this bill works toward our shared goals of keeping youth safe and families and communities together.

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JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR OF HAWAII

TIA L.R. HARTSOCK, MSW, MSCJA
DIRECTOR OF OFFICE OF WELLNESS AND RESILIENCE

STATE OF HAWAII
OFFICE OF WELLNESS AND RESILIENCE
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Testimony on H.B. 1565 HD2

RELATING TO CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

Representative Chris Todd, Chair

Representative Jenna Takenouchi, Vice Chair

House Committee on Finance

February 25, 2026, at 2:00 p.m.; Room Number: 308

The Office of Wellness and Resilience (OWR) **Supports** H.B. 1565 HD2, Relating to Child Welfare Services and defers to the Judiciary.

The mission of the Office of Wellness and Resilience is to strengthen state systems and services by advancing hope-centered principles and supporting Hawaiʻi's transition toward becoming a trauma-informed state. As the state agency that administered the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group, our office had the privilege of working closely with individuals with lived experience and expertise in the child welfare service system, as well as with state departments and community partners. The recommendations in the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Report center the voices and experiences of children and families most impacted by the system.

Positive outcomes for youth with legal representation. This measure aligns with Section VI of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Report, which recommends strengthening the family court

process for child welfare cases.[1] Throughout the Working Group's discussions, individuals with lived experience in foster care shared that they often faced life-altering decisions without legal guidance or an advocate to ensure their needs were heard.

Research suggests that providing legal representation to young people in foster care not only empowers them to understand their rights and participate meaningfully in court proceedings but also leads to improved outcomes. These include faster permanency—whether through reunification or adoption, greater placement stability, and better access to needed services.[2]

H.B. 1565 creates an opportunity for those with lived expertise to collaborate with the Judiciary, Child Welfare Services, and the Department of the Attorney General to advance this shared vision for Hawai'i's keiki and 'ohana.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important measure.

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

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[1] Mālama 'Ohana Working Group. (2024). *Mālama 'ohana working group report to the legislature: Findings and recommendations of the Mālama 'ohana working group*. State of Hawai'i. Retrieved from https://owr.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/OWR-MOWG_2024Report_Combined.pdf

[2] Orlebeke, B., Zhou, X., Skyles, A., & Zinn, A. (2016).Evaluation of the QIC-ChildRep Best Practices Model Training for Attorneys Representing Children in the Child Welfare System. Chicago, IL: Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago.

To: Committee on Finance
RE: HB1565 HD2 in strong support
Hawaii State Capitol, Conference Room 308
February 25, 2026; 2:00pm

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and members of the committee,

On behalf of Hawaiʻi Children's Action Network (HCAN) Speaks!, mahalo for the opportunity to testify in **STRONG SUPPORT of House Bill 1565 HD2** relating to Child Welfare Services.

This bill represents an important step towards establishing legal counsel for youth in the child welfare system in Hawaiʻi. **HB1565 HD2** establishes a working group to advance access to legal representation for foster youth, ensuring they are included in decisions affecting their lives and that their rights are consistently protected throughout their cases. These cases involve decisions that profoundly impact a young person's safety, family connections, and future.

The working group shall include individuals who have direct, personal experience navigating the state child welfare system during their youth. The bill would also include the appropriation to the Judiciary may be expended for purposes including conducting site visits, drafting required reports, retaining a neutral working group facilitator, and providing stipends or other compensation to working group members who have personal experience with the state child welfare system, either as minors or as parents

Youth with legal counsel have better outcomes, including 40% more likely to exit the foster system within 6 months, 45% more likely to reunify with biological parents, and 65% fewer unnecessary school moves.[1] This bill helps to ensure that youth have legal counsel to help them understand their rights, amplify their voice in court, and assist in supported decision making.

Firsthand accounts shared by youth lived experts[2] in Hawaiʻi as well as national research[3] demonstrates legal counsel for children is necessary to improve the safety and well-being of children and youth involved in the child welfare system. Children and youth facing the challenges and trauma of navigating the child welfare system deserve to have their voices heard and to be listened to regarding the course of their lives. As such the efforts of the working group that would be established by this bill should be guided by and grounded in the experiences of youth-lived experts.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit testimony in **strong support on HB 1565 HD2**.

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[1] National Association of Counsel for Children (URL: https://improvechildrep.org/Home.aspx)
[2] Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Final Report and Recommendations (URL: https://www.malamaohana.net/)
[3] National Association of Counsel for Children (URL: https://improvechildrep.org/Home.aspx)

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Blakelee Estacio, and I'm a 21-year-old advocate with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as President of the Kaua'i HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **strong support** of HB1565, which seeks to establish a working group to enhance legal representation for youth in foster care. I support this bill because it is important to ensure that youth's voices are being heard in the decisions that impact our lives. Being able to have legal representation would also allow youth to have access to different support systems.

Mahalo, for your time and consideration of these important issues. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 out of committee so that all youth in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System have the representation and voice they deserve. Mahalo, for listening.

Blakelee Estacio

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EPIC 'OHANA

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kanioloihoouniamaikaainaloa "Aina" Torcato, and I'm a 22-year-old advocate with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as Historian of the Kaua'i HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **support** of HB1565, which seeks to establish a working group to enhance legal representation for youth in foster care. I support this bill because youth should have a say in what their future holds for them.

Mahalo, for your time and consideration of these important issues. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 out of committee so that all youth in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System have the representation and voice they deserve. Mahalo, for listening.

Kanioloihoouniamaikaainaloa "Aina" Torcato

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EPIC 'OHANA

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Anastasia "Ana" Neumann, and I'm a 24-year-old advocate with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as President of the O'ahu HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **support** of HB1565 I support this bill because it will give youth in the Child Welfare System access to legal representation, improve family court processes to be fairer and youth-friendly, and ensure that youth voices are heard in decisions that directly affect our lives. When I was in care, I often felt confused and powerless during court proceedings because no one was there solely to represent my interests or explain what was happening. Having legal counsel would have helped me better understand my rights, feel safer speaking up, and trust that my voice truly mattered.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important issue and for your commitment to foster youth in Hawai'i. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 out of committee so that all youth in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System are guaranteed meaningful representation and the opportunity to have their voices heard in decisions that shape their futures.

Anastasia "Ana" Neumann

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EPIC 'OHANA

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Destiny-Jade Roberts-Wada, and I'm an 18-year-old advocate with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as a Board Member of the O'ahu HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **support** of HB1565. I support this bill because it will give youth in the Child Welfare System access to legal representation and ensure that youth voices are heard in decisions that directly affect our lives. When I was in care, having legal counsel would have helped me feel like I was part of the decisions that impacted my life and not just simply hope that my Guardian Ad Litem (G.A.L.) has the same plans for my life that I did.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important issue and for your commitment to foster youth in Hawai'i. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 out of committee so that all youth in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System are guaranteed meaningful representation and the opportunity to have their voices heard in decisions that shape their futures.

Destiny-Jade Roberts-Wada

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EPIC 'OHANA

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Serenity Soto and I'm a 17-year-old advocate with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as a Board Member of the O'ahu HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **support** of HB1565. This bill is important because it ensures that youth in the Child Welfare System have access to legal representation, which is something many of us currently lack. Having an attorney would help make family court processes more fair, transparent, and youth-friendly, while also ensuring that young people's voices are heard and respected in decisions that directly impact our lives. When I was in care, I often felt disconnected from my own case. Important decisions were made about my future without my full understanding or meaningful involvement. If I had legal counsel and was more involved in my case, I would have felt more connected, more informed, and more confident that my voice truly mattered. Youth deserve to understand what is happening in their cases and to have someone who can advocate for their rights and best interests.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important issue and for your commitment to foster youth in Hawai'i. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 out of committee so that all youth in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System are guaranteed meaningful representation and the opportunity to have their voices heard in decisions that shape their futures.

Serenity Soto

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EPIC 'OHANA

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Aponi Boyer and I'm a 25-year-old advocate with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as the President of the Maui HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **support** of HB1565. I support this bill because it will give youth in the Child Welfare System access to legal representation. When I was in care, I wish I had an attorney who advocated for me in the best way possible. I often felt that I had no one on my side when it came to my wants and needs while in foster care of being reunited with my grandpa. If I had access to legal representation, I feel that I would have been reunified with my grandpa. Reunifying with my grandpa would have helped me feel like I belonged somewhere and have better support in connecting with my biological family as I navigated adulthood.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important issue and for your commitment to foster youth in Hawai'i. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 out of committee so that all youth in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System are guaranteed meaningful representation and the opportunity to have their voices heard in decisions that shape their futures.

Aponi Boyer

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EPIC 'OHANA

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Keira Arcangel, and I'm a 21-year-old advocate with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as the Vice-President of the Maui HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **support** of HB1565. I support this bill because it will give youth in the Child Welfare System access to legal representation and ensure that youth voices are heard in decisions that directly affect our lives. When I was in care, I really wish I had an attorney who actually fought for what I wanted and needed. My GAL kept saying it was in my "best interest" to stay in a home that I knew wasn't good for me, even though I kept speaking up about the psychological harm I was going through. She was the only person who had the power to help me leave, but because she saw things like me having my own room and being involved in school, she decided that was enough — even after I tried over and over to explain what was really happening. If I had my own attorney, someone whose job was to listen to me and advocate for my voice, I honestly believe things would have been different. I wouldn't still be dealing with the impact of that experience now as an adult.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important issue and for your commitment to foster youth in Hawai'i. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 out of committee so that all youth in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System are guaranteed meaningful representation and the opportunity to have their voices heard in decisions that shape their futures.

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EPIC 'OHANA

Keira Arcangel

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EPIC ʻOHANA

HB-1565-HD-2
Submitted on: 2/24/2026 12:28:56 AM
Testimony for FIN on 2/25/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Precious Ahulau-Kaleo	HI H.O.P.E.S. Initiative, EPIC ?Ohana	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I support this bill.

HB-1565-HD-2
Submitted on: 2/24/2026 12:29:30 AM
Testimony for FIN on 2/25/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Sulinta Hemios	HI H.O.P.E.S. Initiative, EPIC ?Ohana	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I support this bill.

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is James Lee. I am a youth with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as a Board Member of the East Hawai'i HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **support** of HB1565. I am writing in support of this bill because I believe that it will help give youth in the Child Welfare System access to legal representation and make sure that youth voices are heard in discussions that will affect us. When I first got put in the foster care system, I felt lost and did not feel represented looking back. I wish I had an attorney to help support and represent me.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important issue and for your commitment to foster youth in Hawai'i. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 out of committee so that all youth in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System are guaranteed meaningful representation and the opportunity to have their voices heard in decisions that shape their futures.

James Lee

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Phone: (808)838 – 7752 | Email: epic@epicohana.org

EPIC 'OHANA

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kaprice Kuhl and I'm a 21-year-old advocate with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as a Board Member of the West Hawai'i HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **support** of HB1565. I support this bill because it will give youth in foster care, a legal voice, one that is often not heard or uplifted. I was 12 years old when I was taken into foster care and was 14 years old when the idea of going into guardianship was proposed to me. At the time, it was advertised as the perfect solution to all the instability and uncertainty of my Child Welfare case. With everyone, from my resource caregiver to my guardian ad litem telling me it was the best thing to do, I agreed with no hesitation. Shortly after gaining guardianship over me, my guardian began to show her true colors. Things only got more and more difficult until I turned 18 and left. This same situation also happened to two of my foster brothers who are still in that home today. Who knows how many kids in care have experienced similar, if not worse situations? I now realize guardianship was not the best thing for me as a child; it was only the best thing for the Child Welfare case. If I had a lawyer back then, they could explain the guardianship situation, help me realize exactly what that meant, and advocate for what I wanted in the court, which was not that. If I had a lawyer back then, I could have avoided the next four grueling years when I was stuck with

my guardian. With this bill, making it mandatory for the youth to have legal representation within their case will create better, more child-focused, outcomes. That way, no kid is looked at as just another case number.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important issue and for your commitment to foster youth in Hawai'i. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 out of committee so that all youth in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System have the representation and a voice they deserve.

Kaprice Kuhl

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Phone: (808)838 – 7752 | Email: epic@epicohana.org

EPIC 'OHANA

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Elena Barr, and I'm a 21-year-old advocate with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as a Board Member of the West Hawai'i HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **support** of HB 1565. I support this bill because it will make sure that youth voice is valued and heard in decisions that affect us and them. When I was in foster care, it was very hard to make sure my voice was heard and it was difficult for me to have someone hear me out, listen to what I needed, and to be by my side. It was also so stressful to not have a say about decisions that had to do with me about things that would affect me and my life. Not being heard made me feel like I was like a rag doll in the system; the same system that is supposed to be there for kids and help them.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important issue and for your commitment to foster youth in Hawai'i. I respectfully ask that you pass HB 1565 out of committee so that all youth in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System are guaranteed meaningful representation and the opportunity to have their voices heard in decisions that shape their futures.

Elena Barr

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EPIC 'OHANA

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Kysha Rae Pacheco-Paglinawan, and I'm a 22-year-old advocate with lived experience in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System. I currently serve as a Board Member of the West Hawai'i HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Board, where I work alongside other young leaders to uplift foster youth voices and drive meaningful change.

HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As Youth Leadership Board Members, we are committed to educating, advocating, and collaborating to transform the foster care system and improve outcomes for current and former foster youth. The HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Boards also serve as the official youth advisory council to the Child Welfare Services Branch of Hawai'i's Department of Human Services—ensuring that youth perspectives help shape the very systems that impact our lives.

I am submitting testimony in **support** of HB1565. I support this bill because it will amplify youth's voices and meaningfully represent their position within the court, which will directly benefit them during their time in foster care. This bill will also improve access to services and resources being provided to the youth, which will allow youth in care to feel more equitable with their peers. I believe this bill is essential to ensuring that youth are not only present within these spaces but truly listened to and so that others take accountability over them. When I was in care, I rarely felt that my voice was rarely considered or taken seriously. Decisions were made on my behalf by the adults who believed that they knew what was best for me. However, through constant challenged, and countless conversations, I made the effort to ensure that the adults around me knew of my circumstances and best interests through my perspective. Our voices matter--especially as we are the ones most often overlooked.

Thank you for taking the time to consider this important issue and for your commitment to foster youth in Hawai'i. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 out of committee so that all youth in

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EPIC 'OHANA

Hawai'i's Child Welfare System are guaranteed meaningful representation and the opportunity to have their voices heard in decisions that shape their futures.

Kysha Rae Pacheco-Paglinawan

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Phone: (808)838 – 7752 | Email: epic@epicohana.org

EPIC 'OHANA

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Patricia "Patty" Chin. I serve as the HI H.O.P.E.S. (Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success) Initiative Manager at EPIC 'Ohana. The initiative is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who've experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital.

I am submitting testimony in **strong support of HB1565 with amendements**, which seeks to establish a working group to enhance legal representation for youth in foster care. As the bill moves forward, the HI H.O.P.E.S. Initiative respectfully requests an amendment to ensure that the working group includes a former Guardian Ad Litem (GAL). We understand the Judiciary's concerns about potential conflicts of interest for active GALs, particularly related to procurement. However, a former GAL would not face those limitations and can offer critical insight into how representation currently functions, where gaps exist, and how the system can better support youth's voice, rights, and well-being. Including a former GAL would strengthen the working group by ensuring that the expertise of those who have directly served youth in court is represented—without compromising neutrality or procurement rules.

Research from States that have already implemented Counsel for Youth shows clear, measurable benefits. Youth are 40% more likely to exit foster care within 6 months and 45% more likely to reunify with their biological parents. They also experience 30% fewer placement moves, along with 65% fewer unnecessary school moves, demonstrating the stability and improved outcomes that legal representation can provide. These outcomes represent more than numbers. They represent stability, healing, and hope.

In my work, I have the privilege of partnering with current and former foster youth across Hawai'i. I listen to their stories, their frustrations, and their dreams for a better system. One theme emerges again and again that youth are often left uninformed about their Child Welfare cases and excluded from decisions that profoundly shape their lives. Just as concerning, I frequently hear young people say that their future feels like they are left up to chance. Chance that someone happens to

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EPIC 'OHANA

be in their corner, chance that an adult chooses to advocate for their needs and wants, chance that someone listens. No young person's future should depend on chance. As a former foster youth myself (2005 – 2013), these stories are painfully familiar. While I was grateful to have a Guardian Ad Litem, I now recognize how limited my interactions were and how little I understood her role. I did not understand the decisions being made about me. I did not have the support I needed to meaningfully participate in my own case. With the knowledge I have today, I firmly believe that legal representation would have allowed me to be more engaged, more informed, and more empowered and that it could have prevented some of the trauma my family and I experienced.

HB1565 is a meaningful step toward ensuring that no young person must navigate the system in the dark or rely on chance to be heard. It affirms that youth deserve to be seen, heard, and supported. It signals that they will not simply be talked about but truly listened to. They will not just be guided but empowered. That they will not only be present but represented. For these reasons, the HI H.O.P.E.S. Initiative stands in strong support of HB1565 and respectfully urges you to pass this bill. Mahalo, for your time, your attention, and your commitment to Hawai'i's youth.

Patricia "Patty" Chin

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EPIC 'OHANA

Judith F. Clark
48-218 Kamehameha Highway
808-499-9966
Judithforceclark@gmail.com
Kaneohe, Hawaii 96744

February 25, 2026

To: Representative Donovan Dela Cruz, Chair,
And members of the Committee on Ways and Means

Testimony in Support of HB 1565 HD2 Relating to Child Welfare Services

As a community advocate and the former Executive Director of Hawaii Youth Services Network, I strongly support HB 1565 HD 2.

The Malama Ohana Work Group's report contains recommendations s to strengthen the Family Court process in child welfare cases. This includes reducing delays in legal proceedings and ensuring access to legal representation for youth.

Hawaiʻi is 1 of 13 states where foster youth do not have the right to an attorney in their court cases. Our youth deserve more. They deserve to be heard in decisions about their lives, their families, and their futures. This bill creates a working group to advance foster youths' access to legal representation, to ensure youth are included in decisions and that their rights are upheld in their cases.

Youth with lawyers have better outcomes, including 40% more likely to exit the foster system within 6 months, 45% more likely to reunify with biological parents, and 65% fewer unnecessary school moves.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Judith F. Clark, MPH

Chair Chriss Todd
Finance (FIN)

HB1565 HD2

Wednesday, February 25, 2026
2:00 PM Via Videoconference, Room 30

IN SUPPORT

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee, my name is Richard Dominguez. As a social work student I am testifying in support of **House Bill 1565 HD2**.

As an emerging social worker, I have seen firsthand how system gaps disproportionately affect vulnerable youth, particularly Native Hawaiian and other historically marginalized communities within Hawai‘i. **House Bill 1565 HD2** is a critical and timely step toward strengthening our child welfare system by establishing a Judiciary working group to improve family court processes, including access to legal representation for youth involved in child protection proceedings.

This measure thoughtfully builds upon the recommendations of the Mālama ‘Ohana Working Group and recognizes that improving court processes is essential to achieving trauma-informed, equitable outcomes. Youth have shared that they often feel excluded from decision-making, uninformed about their cases, and unheard when raising concerns about safety. Ensuring meaningful access to legal representation is not only a matter of fairness, it is a protective factor that can reduce prolonged court involvement, prevent additional system-related harm, and promote stability and permanency.

HB1565 HD2 strengthens this effort by placing the working group within the Judiciary, requiring examination of best practices in other jurisdictions through site visits, and mandating a report with recommendations, including a pilot program to test a model for delivering counsel services to youth of a selected age range in a selected jurisdiction. These amendments demonstrate a commitment to thoughtful implementation rather than symbolic reform.

Importantly, the bill ensures representation from individuals with lived experience navigating the child welfare system and provides compensation for their participation. Youth and young adults involved in child welfare are the experts of their own lives. Case plans and services are more effective when youth are authentically engaged. Research consistently shows that meaningful youth engagement improves safety, well-being, and permanency outcomes. Authentic engagement requires more than inviting youth to the table, it requires creating safe and supportive spaces where they feel heard, respected, and protected. Legal representation is a key mechanism to ensure their voices are not only heard but acted upon.

By establishing a working group that includes lived experiences and examines best

practices, **HB1565 HD2** creates an opportunity for child welfare professionals to meet youth where they are at, provide clear information and support, and follow their lead throughout the court process.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to support **HB1565 HD2**, as this bill represents a thoughtful, collaborative, and necessary approach to improving Hawai‘i child welfare and family court systems.

Richard Dominguez
rpd2@hawaii.edu

HB-1565-HD-2
Submitted on: 2/24/2026 10:16:08 AM
Testimony for FIN on 2/25/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Nicole Trost	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha,

This initiative is essential to help improve our court and child welfare system to not only benefit the families impacted but most importantly the youth in foster care who sometimes lack adequate support and advocacy. This initiative with be build from a cultural and strength's perspective hoping to bring great change to our community and systems in place. There was a lot of work put into this project and it would be a dis-service to our community if it does not continue. Throughout the process of the workgroup there were bold testimonies where community members shared their life experiences which brought vital insight to the missing pieces, disconnection, misunderstanding, and sometimes life altering decisions that impacted many that were involved in the system sometimes leading to unfortunate and detrimental outcomes. The Malama Ohana workgroup is essential to rebuild our system in order to make great change for families impacted by systems they are involved with. Please consider moving forward with passing this bill.

Mahalo Nui,

Nicole

HB-1565-HD-2
Submitted on: 2/23/2026 8:14:00 PM
Testimony for FIN on 2/25/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Johnnie-Mae L. Perry	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I, Johnnie-Mae L. Perry, Support

1565 HB RELATING TO CHILD WELFARE SERVICES.

TO INCLUDE CLIENT TO BE AN "ADVOCATE" FOR SELF, AGE APPROPRIATE.

Aloha Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Jheresa Sembrano. I serve as the HI H.O.P.E.S. Specialist for Kaua‘i. HI H.O.P.E.S.—which stands for Hawai‘i Helping Our People Envision Success—is a statewide initiative dedicated to ensuring that young people who’ve experienced foster care, especially those ages 14 to 26, have the relationships, resources, and opportunities they need to thrive. We partner with public and private organizations at both the state and local levels to improve policies and practices, promote youth voice and leadership, apply research and evaluation, and build strong community connections. Our work centers on creating pathways to success in areas like permanency, education, employment, housing, health, financial capability, and social capital. As the HI H.O.P.E.S. Specialist for Kaua‘i part of my kuleana is to support the work of the Youth Leadership Board Members on Kaua‘i whose mission is to educate, advocate, and collaborate for improvements to the foster care system and promote better outcomes for foster youth.

I am submitting testimony in strong support of HB 1565 and its intent to establish a working group to enhance legal representation for youth in foster care. I recently began working in my role supporting youth and families involved in the foster care system. While I do not have lived experience myself, I have grown up alongside family members and friends who have been in foster care, and their journeys have given me a deep commitment to step up and support those who need it. Through hearing their stories, one challenge consistently stands out: many youths are left uninformed about the child welfare and legal processes that directly affect their lives. Providing legal counsel would not only help young people understand their rights but also build their confidence. This bill creates a pathway for youth to find their own leo (voice) and feel empowered to share their mana‘o (thoughts), encouraging them to make informed decisions about their futures.

Mahalo nui loa for your time and consideration of these important issues. I respectfully ask that you pass HB1565 so that all youth in Hawai‘i’s Child Welfare System have the representation and voice they deserve.

Jheresa K. Sembrano

HB-1565-HD-2
Submitted on: 2/24/2026 10:59:01 AM
Testimony for FIN on 2/25/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Keola Pagud	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha House Chair, Co-Chair, and Members of the Finance Committee,

I support this opportunity to explore how to elevate the responsiveness of legal representation for some of our most vulnerable youth in our pae aina o Hawaii, our Island chain.

In support respectfully,

Keola Pagud, MSW

Person of Lived Experience Navigating Child Welfare as a Minor

TO: Committee on Finance
Rep. Chris Todd, Chair
Rep. Jenna Takenouchi, Vice Chair
Committee Members

HEARING: Wednesday, February 25, 2026 at 2:00 PM
Conference Room 308

FROM: Sharla-Ann Houlding

RE: Testimony in SUPPORT of HB1565, HD2 – Relating to Child Welfare Services

My name is Sharla-Ann Houlding. I am a Supervisor for the HI H.O.P.E.S. Initiative, whose mission is to educate, advocate and collaborate for improvements to the foster care system and promote better outcomes for youth in foster care. I am submitting testimony in strong support of HB 1565, HD2 and its intent to appropriate funds to establish a working group to improve family court processes, including access to legal representation for youth in the child welfare system.

Children and youth in the child welfare system are among the most vulnerable members of our society. Many have experienced significant trauma, instability, and uncertainty due to circumstances entirely beyond their control. Yet, despite being the central focus of child welfare cases, foster youth are often provided with little to no information about their own case, the legal process, or the timeline regarding decisions being made on their behalf. This lack of transparency leaves young people feeling confused, frustrated, powerless, and it frequently results in disengagement from social workers, Guardians ad Litem (GALs), and other professionals who are making life-altering decisions about their future.

Research supports the notion that providing skilled legal representation to children and youth in foster care leads to significantly better outcomes including:

- **Improved court participation and satisfaction:** although every child in foster care is appointed a GAL or Court-Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), neither of these entities directly represent the child's voice; they advocate what *they* feel is in the child's best interests. Additionally, these entities are ***not*** bound by attorney-client privilege as they do not legally represent the child in court, so they may be called to testify and disclose information the child did not want disclosed openly in court. However, when a young person has their own state-licensed attorney that they can express their wishes, views, and needs to, who they know will advocate for what they want, the young person is more likely to engage in court proceedings.
- **Increased rates of family reunification:** children who had legal representation were more than 40% successful in exiting foster care to permanency (i.e., reunification, legal guardianship, or adoption) and did not have to "age out" of foster care (Chapin Hall, 2008).

- **Reduced time in foster care:** children who were represented by an experienced attorney who completed their specialized training were 40% more likely to exit the system by achieving permanency within six months as compared to children whose attorneys did not receive the same training. This has been shown to save state systems time, money, and valuable resources.
- **Better educational and well-being outcomes:** youth in foster care with attorneys were 65% less likely to experience an unnecessary change in their school and 30% less likely to experience a change in foster homes as compared to their peers who did not have legal representation in court.

We have hit a critical point for children who have been impacted by the child welfare system. We know the names of the children in cases where legal advocacy could have saved their lives. We must not let their suffering be wasted lessons. We have the responsibility to change policies for children and youth who will be forced to enter foster care in the future by drawing upon the lessons we have learned from the children we have failed.

I respectfully ask that the Committee pass HB 1565, HD2 to ensure that our children in the child welfare system are equipped with the proper tools and resources to navigate a very complex system. Additionally, I would like to respectfully address the amendment that removed a GAL from serving on the working group. I understand the reasons for this amendment; however, I believe it is critical that the working group include the perspective of all who are currently tasked to represent the child's voice to the courts. If the Committee's intent is to avoid any conflicts of interest or ensure neutrality in shaping the next model being adopted of attorney representation for youth, I respectfully ask for a balanced approach to include a former GAL. This will also bring this bill in alignment with the language included in the companion bill SD 2678, SD 1, who made amendments to the bill to include a former GAL instead of striking the GAL from the working group.

Including a former GAL that is no longer appointed in cases in the working group will invite them to draw upon their experiences to provide the much-needed insight into strengths and gaps of the current GAL model. Including a former GAL will strengthen the working group and provide recommendations from a perspective that is not adequately represented by any other member of the current proposed working group composition.

By passing this bill, Hawaiʻi has the opportunity to focus on providing the necessary support and resources to protect the rights, safety, and well-being of children in foster care. Passing this bill will ensure youth voices are uplifted and their rights are honored and upheld. Providing legal counsel to youth goes beyond advocacy—it is about social justice, fairness, equality, and the recognition that every child deserves to have a voice and direct input regarding the decisions that will profoundly impact their lives and their future.

Mahalo for your time, consideration, and for the opportunity to testify.

With my deepest gratitude and aloha,

Sharla-Ann Houlding, LCSW

February 25th 2026
Conference Room 308
State Capitol
415 South Beretania Street

Miala Matsumoto
Testimony in support of Bill HB1565

Dear Dear Chairmen Chris Todd and the Committee of Finances

My name is Miala Matsumoto and I am a social working student at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. I am writing to you to support Bill HB1565. A bill to give youth proper legal representation in the child welfare system.

This bill is an important bill that could've saved a lot of prior adolescents. This bill would help the youth that claims they were never properly informed about their own case and would allow these children to be safe and heard. As a child who did indeed feel lost in their own family court cases and not feeling like there was anyone I could talk to, this bill could really give young children a voice. A voice that can be used to express how they feel about their own cases and instead of making these children feel like they're just waiting for their results, they can feel like they actually have a say in these results. Many research shows that when there is legal representation given it has impacted many children's foster care experiences and has even helped improve unification with the children's family. Therefore this bill could help fulfill the needs in the child welfare system thanks to the Malama Ohana working group. This working group took their time to listen to everyone's lived experiences and they took that to create an idea for a trauma-informed and a child welfare system that focuses on our youth.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Miala Matsumoto

LATE *Testimony submitted late may not be considered by the Committee for decision making purposes.

HB-1565-HD-2
Submitted on: 2/24/2026 3:41:23 PM
Testimony for FIN on 2/25/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Shana Wailana Kukila	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair Tarnas, Vice Chair Poepoe, and Committee Members,

My testimony is **in support** of HB1565 HD2.

As a former CWS foster parent, a former CWS birth parent, and now an advocate for families in Hawai'i's Child Welfare Services system, I would like to be considered for a seat at the table within this Working Group. Life experience is a vital part of any working group of this importance, and I believe my contributions would be of great value here.

While it is good to have birth parents represent CWS families, I believe there needs to be more than one birth parent represented because there is more than one kind of birth parent (mothers, father, dv, etc.). To better understand the legal needs of birth parents, perhaps there should be the same amount of them on the Working Group as there are former foster youth: **three.**

For over a year, I was fully engaged with the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group as we consulted around the transformation of Hawai'i's Child Welfare Services, and I have seen how little attention has been paid to children and parents with disabilities in the family courts and CWS system. As a birth parent, I have experienced this first hand in the CWS system, as others have like me. This must change. I would like to share my knowledge and personal experience in meaningful way, if given the opportunity.

For example, attorneys for disabled children and their parents in any court proceeding should be fully qualified to do so. Especially in family court, where most of the disabled find themselves at some time in their lives. State sponsored attorneys for the disabled cannot be the average attorney, they must be well versed in guardianship law, disability rights, disability law, and the constitutional and civil rights of their disabled clients and their parents. Otherwise, the state is exposed to liability for not properly following federal law for the protection of the disabled.

The disabled community is a sector of the child welfare services population that is tragically underserved, which has led to often negative and sometimes fatal outcomes. I can speak to this. We need more support, not to have our children removed and then placed in unsafe, unqualified homes outside of their birth home. The disabled require Individualized Support Plans (ISPs), but in Hawai'i's Child Welfare System, this is not being provided. This is in direct non-compliance with federal requirements under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This needs to be corrected, but there is nobody implementing it.

Without the voice of the disabled and their parents, these issues and others would not be heard and this Working Group will not fully reflect the most vulnerable populations of which Child Welfare Services is meant to serve. This is a federal protection as well, under the ADA.

Please consider the addition of **three birth parents** to your list of Working Group Participants, in particular, one with a special needs child like me.

Mahalo for your consideration of this measure. It is a long time in coming, and will prevent many children from unnecessary foster care confiinement or placement in unsafe or unqualified homes.