



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

‘ŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAII

Legislative Testimony

Hō'ike Mana'o I Mua O Ka 'Aha'ōlelo

Testimony Presented Before the
House Committee on Higher Education
February 4, 2026 at 2:00 p.m.

By

Debora Halbert
Vice President for Academic Strategy
University of Hawai'i System

HB 1596 – RELATING TO STUDENT BASIC NEEDS SUPPORT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII.

Chair Garrett, Vice Chair Amato, and Members of the Committee:

The University of Hawai'i supports HB 1596 – Relating to Student Basic Needs Support at the University Of Hawai'i. The University of Hawai'i (UH) serves a diverse student population across ten campuses, many of whom are low-income, first-generation, working students, student parents, and individuals navigating Hawai'i's high cost of living. Findings from the *UH Landscape Assessment of Student Basic Needs Insecurity* published in 2025 demonstrate that food insecurity, housing instability, and limited access to public benefits remain significant and interrelated barriers to student success. These challenges are associated with lower retention, delayed completion, and increased likelihood of stop-out or withdrawal.

HB 1596 reflects a data-informed and measured approach by authorizing a single-campus pilot program that integrates benefits navigation, coordinated outreach, and targeted housing stability support. This structure aligns closely with the strategies outlined in the *UH Student Basic Needs Master Plan 2.0* published in 2024, which emphasizes system-level coordination paired with campus-level implementation tailored to local needs, capacity, and community partnerships.

Requiring evaluation and accountability of the pilot program are important. The annual student basic needs survey and reporting on service utilization, persistence, and academic progress are consistent with UH's commitment to evidence-based decision-making. The pilot framework will allow UH to better understand which interventions most effectively support students before considering broader expansion.

By strengthening the infrastructure that helps students meet their basic needs, this measure supports not only individual student success but also Hawai'i's broader workforce and economic goals. Students who are able to remain enrolled, persist, and complete their programs are better positioned to contribute meaningfully to their communities and the state.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of HB 1596.



O'ahu Youth Action Board

Est. 2017

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TESTIMONY IN STRONG SUPPORT OF HB 1596 Relating to Student Basic Needs Support at the University of Hawai'i

TO: House Committee on Higher Education

FROM: Efren Berrones- Co-Chair of O'ahu Youth Action Board,
Partners In Care (PIC)

Hearing: Wednesday, February 4, 2026, 2:00 PM

Chair Garrett, Vice Chair Amato, and Members of the House
Committee on Higher Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in strong support
of HB 1596, Relating to Student Basic Needs Support at the
University of Hawai'i.

My name is Efren Berrones, and I serve as the Chair of the O'ahu
Youth Action Board (OYAB). OYAB is a designated board composed
of youth with lived experience of homelessness on O'ahu,
advocating for policy changes that directly impact houseless young
people. We firmly believe that any decisions affecting us must
include our voices, perspectives, and lived experiences.

For young people experiencing homelessness, college represents
hope. It is the clearest path they can see toward a life of stability,
independence, and opportunity. But hope is not enough to get you
there. Before a young person experiencing homelessness can sit in a
classroom, they have to figure out where they are sleeping that
night. They have to find a way to eat. They have to get across town.
They have to do all of this without a parent guiding them, without a
stable address, and often without anyone in their corner at all. For
many, these barriers become too much—and college slips out of
reach before it ever truly begins.

And even for those who do make it onto a campus, the fight is far
from over. Without stable housing and access to basic needs, it is
nearly impossible to focus on coursework, stay enrolled, and see it
through to graduation. Education is one of the most powerful tools

for breaking cycles of homelessness—but only if young people can actually hold onto it.

Other states have recognized this and started to act. The University of California system has received more than \$24 million annually since 2019 for rehousing and basic needs programs. Hawai'i has the opportunity to follow that lead. HB 1596 would establish a Basic Needs Pilot Program and a Housing Stability Pilot Project within the University of Hawai'i system. For young people experiencing homelessness, this is not just a pilot program—it is a chance. A chance to finally have the stability they need to show up, stay enrolled, and finish what they started.

We urge you to pass HB 1596 and give Hawai'i's most vulnerable young people that chance.

Mahalo for your consideration and commitment to Hawai'i's youth.

With Aloha,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Efren Berrones". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letters of each name being capitalized and prominent.

Efren Berrones

Co-Chair, O'ahu Youth Action Board

efrenb@partnersincareoahu.org

HB-1596

Submitted on: 1/30/2026 8:50:31 PM

Testimony for HED on 2/4/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Lorna Holmes	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Yes, as a teacher at UH Manoa, I can testify that many students are in dire need of basic support; the cost of housing is one of the biggest problems. Please pass this measure and give local students the chance to succeed.

Mahalo for your consideration,

Dr. Lorna Holmes, Mo'ili'ili 96826