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**THE HONORABLE KARL RHOADS, CHAIR
SENATE COMMITTEE ON JUDICIARY
Thirty-Third State Legislature
Regular Session of 2026
State of Hawai'i**

February 3, 2026

**RE: S.B. 2251; MAKING AN APPROPRIATION FOR THE VICTIM WITNESS
ASSISTANCE PROGRAM.**

Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard and members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary, the Department of the Prosecuting Attorney of the City and County of Honolulu (“Department”) submits the following testimony in strong support of S.B. 2251. This bill is part of the Department's 2026 legislative package, and we thank you for hearing it.

S.B. 2251 provides additional funding in the amount of **\$500,000** for fiscal year 2026-2027 to maintain the current level of service for the Department's Victim Witness Kokua Services (“VWKS”) Unit. This appropriation is required because of decline in available federal Victims of Crime Act funds, which were paid by criminal fines and forfeitures, rather than taxpayer dollars. With revenue decreasing from the fines and penalties imposed on federal offenders, salaries for VWKS advocates have been imperiled.

VWKS advocates guide and assist victims, witnesses, and/or surviving family members throughout the criminal system—before, during, and after criminal prosecution of a case. They are specifically trained and qualified to do so. Support services are crucial, not just because crime often inflicts direct trauma on victims, but because the criminal justice system itself can be bewildering. Victims of crime are doubly involuntary participants in the criminal justice system. They did not consent to the criminal act. Nor can victims control the course and scope of the resulting litigation because the State in a criminal case can only vindicate a general interest in justice, not any private advantage or individual concern. Guidance and support for victims gives them some measure of autonomy, sympathy, and hope.

Legislative support for the Victim Witness Assistance Program dates back to 1983. In 1986, the Legislature enacted HRS § 28-111, formally creating a victim-witness assistance program “whose purpose shall be to provide information, assistance, and support services to the victims of and witnesses to crimes committed in the State.”

While the statute established this program to be administrated by the Department of the Attorney General, direct services are provided by the county prosecutors. The prosecutor continuously provide the most up-to-date information, assistance, funding, and support services to crime victims and witnesses in their respective counties. Adequate funding is necessary for our Department and the neighbor island counties to continue these vital services.

The Department strongly supports the passage of S.B. 2251.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

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SB-2251

Submitted on: 2/3/2026 1:16:51 AM
Testimony for JDC on 2/3/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Angela Young	Testifying for Kapalama Neighborhood Security Watch	Support	Remotely Via Zoom

Comments:

Support of appropriation of funds.

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LATE

TO: Senator Karl Rhoads, Chair
Senator Mike Gabbard, Vice Chair
Senate Committee on Judiciary

RE: Senate Bill 2251, Making An Appropriation for the Victim Witness Assistance Program

HEARING: Tuesday, February 3, 2026, 9:00 a.m.
Conference Room 16

Good morning, Chair Rhoads and Vice Chair Gabbard and members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. My name is Dennis Dunn, and I am the former Director of the Victim Witness Kokua Services in the Honolulu Prosecuting Attorney's Office, having retired at the end of 2022 after 44 years of service with the program. I am testifying today in strong support of S.B. 2251, which provides for a Grant in Aid for the City and County of Honolulu Department of the Prosecuting to fund the critical operations of the Victim Witness Assistance Program in that Department.

Since 1983, the Legislature has provided support for the Victim Witness Assistance Program. In 1986, the Legislature enacted Statute Section 28-111 that established the Victim Witness Assistance Program on a statewide basis. This statute establishes the program in the Department of Attorney General, with the purpose of providing information, assistance, and support services to the victims and witnesses of crimes committed in Hawaii. The Attorney General is mandated to allocate and award funds to those counties whose Victim Witness Assistance programs are in substantial compliance with policies and criteria established by the Attorney General in cooperation with the county prosecutors.

The Honolulu Victim Witness Kokua Services, with the support of the Legislature, and even greater funding from the City and County of Honolulu, has developed into one of the finest services of its kind in the country, serving thousands of victims and witnesses in Honolulu every year.

Victims are usually the key witnesses in a case. Without their testimony, criminals cannot be held responsible for their actions and remain free to hurt others in the community. Victims need assistance to face the rigors of testifying in court and they require help in recovering from the trauma of criminal victimization. The Victim/Witness Kokua Services provides this support.

The mission of the Prosecuting Attorney of the City and County of Honolulu is to seek justice, which must be equally available to both victims and defendants. Legislators had this in mind when they created Chapter 801D of the Hawaii Revised Statutes [H.R.S.],

Rights of Victims and Witnesses in Criminal Proceedings. Those very rights established by law are significantly diminished when the funding base erodes, as it has in recent years with precipitous reductions in federal funds available through the Victims of Crime Act (VOCA). Crime victims' right to information, which is the very cornerstone of H.R.S. Chapter 801D, is severely jeopardized by the staffing reductions that may occur as a consequence of the continual federal budget cuts.

We note that the City & County of Honolulu now pays far more proportionately (over \$1,000,000) for its victim/assistance program than state law requires. H.R.S. 28-111, which created the State Victim/Witness Assistance Program, requires counties to match 25 percent of the program funding. Honolulu now provides the program almost forty times the matching requirement. By paying for the largest percentage of the program costs, Honolulu has already proved its commitment to helping victims.

Victims and Witnesses in Honolulu are depending on your financial support to ensure that adequate support services are available as they traverse the challenges of Hawai'i's criminal justice system. I have seen firsthand how critically important this program is for crime victims. Please support S.B. 2251.

Thank you for your time and consideration.