



Hawai'i State Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Plus Commission



Advocating for the Hawai'i LGBTQIA+ Community

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February 4, 2026

House's Committees on Health, and Human Services & Homelessness
Hawai'i State Capitol
415 South Beretania Street
Honolulu, HI 96813

Hearing: Friday, February 6, 2026, at 9:00 AM

RE: Strong Support for House Bill 1537

Aloha Chairs Takayama and Marten, Vice Chairs Keohokapu-Lee Loy and Olds and fellow committee members,

I am writing in strong support of House Bill 1537 on behalf of the Hawai'i State Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer Plus (LGBTQ+) Commission, which was established by the 2022 Hawai'i State Legislature to

“improve the State's interface with members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus community; identify the short- and long-range needs of its members; and ensure that there is an effective means of researching, planning, and advocating for the equity of this population in all aspects of state government.”

The Hawai'i State LGBTQ+ Commission submits this testimony in strong support of House Bill 1537, which appropriates funds to the Department of Health to contract with community-based organizations to provide preventive and early intervention mental health services to adolescents within their communities, and requires reporting to the Legislature.

HB 1537 recognizes an essential truth: adolescents are more likely to access and benefit from mental health services when those services are culturally responsive, community-based, and delivered by trusted organizations. Early intervention and prevention are proven strategies that reduce crisis-level outcomes, improve long-term wellbeing, and lower overall system costs. Investing in this approach reflects a proactive and humane response to the growing mental health needs of our youth.

The Commission respectfully requests that this measure be amended to explicitly include and prioritize underserved and over-policed communities within the bill language. These communities include, but are not limited to, [māhū](#), [LGBTQIA+](#), [QTPI+](#), Native Hawaiian, and immigrant keiki. Adolescents within these communities

Proudly established pursuant to Hawai'i Revised Statutes Chapter 369, as enacted through Act 41, Session Laws of Hawai'i 2022

HI State LGBTQ+ Commission Testimony in Support of HB 1537

experience disproportionate rates of depression, anxiety, suicidality, family rejection, school-based harassment, and interactions with punitive systems rather than supportive services. Without intentional inclusion, these young people are too often left behind, even in well-meaning programs.

Explicitly naming underserved and over-policed communities will help ensure that funding reaches organizations with demonstrated cultural competency and lived experience serving these populations. It will also strengthen accountability, data collection, and outcome reporting, allowing the Legislature to better understand how investments are improving access and equity across diverse communities.

HB 1537 is a meaningful step toward building a mental health system that meets youth where they are, before challenges escalate into crises. With the requested amendment, this bill can more fully realize its promise by ensuring that all adolescents, especially those most marginalized, have access to affirming, preventive, and community-rooted mental health support.

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide testimony and for your commitment to the wellbeing of Hawai'i's keiki.

If you or any member of your staff has any questions regarding my testimony you can reach me at hawaiistatelgbtqpluscommission@gmail.com.

Mahalo nui loa for your time and consideration,

Michael Golojuch, Jr. (he/him)
Vice Chair
[Hawai'i State LGBTQ+ Commission](#)



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DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
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**Testimony in SUPPORT of HB1537
RELATING TO MENTAL HEALTH**

REPRESENTATIVE GREGG TAKAYAMA, CHAIR
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

REPRESENTATIVE LISA MARTEN, CHAIR
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & HOMELESSNESS

Hearing Date: February 6, 2026 Time: 09:00 AM Room Number: 329

1 **Fiscal Implications:** The Department of Health (“Department”) requests funding for this
2 measure be considered as a vehicle to expand services, including staff support, provided it does
3 not supplant the requests outlined in the Governor's executive budget request.

4 **Department Position:** The Department strongly supports this measure.

5 **Department Testimony:** The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Division (CAMHD) provides
6 the following testimony on behalf of the Department.

7 The Department supports this measure which proposes an appropriation to the Department of
8 Health of \$3,000,000 to contract with community-based organizations to provide preventative
9 and early intervention mental health services to adolescents within the community. It is in
10 alignment with the Department’s vision that all Hawai‘i residents have a fair and just
11 opportunity to achieve optimal health and well-being.

12 Recent disasters in Hawai‘i have highlighted the importance of preventative mental health
13 services for our youth. Community-based organizations have an important role in providing
14 these preventative and early intervention mental health services for adolescents to help them

1 develop healthy coping skills and behaviors and address emerging mental health concerns.

2 Psychoeducation and skill building can provide adolescents with the tools they need to take
3 care of their mental health and well-being in the face of adversity, now and in their future.

4 The Department of Health will work closely with the other state child-serving agencies to
5 ensure that programming is coordinated and addresses gaps in the current system.

6 **Offered Amendments:** Given the time it takes to encumber funds and complete the
7 competitive procurement process, it is anticipated that contract awards would be made near
8 the end of the 2026 calendar year; the Department respectfully suggests that a report to the
9 2028 legislature will be much more meaningful.

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

JON N. IKENAGA
PUBLIC DEFENDER

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February 4, 2026

HB 1537: RELATING TO MENTAL HEALTH

Chair Takayama, Chair Marten, Vice-Chair Keohokapu-Lee Loy, Vice-Chair Olds, and Members of the Committee on Health, and Members of the Committee on Human Services and Homelessness:

The Office of the Public Defender (OPD) **supports HB 1537** appropriates fund to the Department of Health to contract with community-based organizations to provide mental health services to adolescents, and requires a report to the Legislature.

The OPD represents individuals at the point where systems have already failed - when unmet needs, untreated trauma, and unaddressed mental health conditions have escalated into court involvement. From that vantage point, we see firsthand the long-term consequences of failing to intervene early in the lives of children and adolescents.

This measure recognizes what experience and research have long shown: adolescence is a critical window for early mental health intervention, and prevention efforts during this stage can meaningfully change life trajectories. The Legislature's findings correctly note that many mental health conditions begin during adolescence, often remain undiagnosed, and are exacerbated by compounding trauma, substance use, and lack of access to services.

The OPD regularly represents adult clients whose involvement in the criminal legal system can be traced back to untreated childhood trauma and unmet mental health needs. Many of our clients experienced significant adversity early in life such as family instability, abuse, neglect, community violence, housing insecurity, and substance exposure, without timely access to mental health screening or support.

By the time these individuals reach adulthood, untreated depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and substance use disorders often manifest as criminalized behavior rather than being addressed as health needs. At that stage, interventions are far more costly, less effective, and frequently entangled with incarceration, probation, or other forms of system involvement.

We see this cycle repeat itself too often. Early, community-based prevention and intervention programs, particularly those integrated into schools and accessible settings, offer a meaningful opportunity to interrupt that pipeline before children enter the criminal justice system at all.

This measure appropriately emphasizes preventive and early intervention services, including education, screening, and community-based supports. These approaches not only promote healthy coping mechanisms and emotional development but also reduce reliance on substances as a means of self-medication - a pattern we commonly observe among justice-involved individuals.

From a public safety perspective, prevention works. Addressing mental health needs early reduces the likelihood of later justice system involvement, lowers long-term costs to the State, and improves outcomes for individuals, families, and communities. From a human perspective, it affirms that children deserve support before their struggles are mislabeled as misconduct.

We also strongly support the bill's focus on contracting with community-based organizations, including services delivered within schools. Community-based providers are often best positioned to deliver culturally responsive, trauma-informed care and to reach youth who might otherwise fall through the cracks. The reporting requirements included in the bill further ensure accountability and transparency, allowing the Legislature to assess outcomes and effectiveness while continuing to refine the State's approach to adolescent mental health services.

The OPD supports HB 1537.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this measure.



HB1537 Mental Health Prevention

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

Rep. Gregg Takayama, Chair

Rep. Sue L. Keohokapu-Lee, Vice Chair

COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & HOMELESSNESS

Rep. Lisa Marten, Chair

Rep. Ikaika Olds, Vice Chair

Friday, Feb 6, 2026: 9:00: Room 329 Videoconference

Hawaii Substance Abuse Coalition Supports HB1537:

ALOHA CHAIR, VICE CHAIR, AND DISTINGUISHED COMMITTEE MEMBERS. My name is Alan Johnson. I am the ad hoc leader of the Hawaii Substance Abuse Coalition (HSAC), a statewide organization for substance use disorder and co-occurring mental health disorder prevention and treatment agencies and recovery-oriented services.

Mental Health prevention, (no formal program exists in Hawaii yet) can be integrated with the existing substance use disorder prevention programs that is both school-based and community-based. *Infrastructure is already in place with staffing, school relationships, and programs that can be adapted* to mental health as well as this would be *more comprehensive by integrating both mental health and substance use disorders, alcohol, and tobacco usage*, including vaping.

Integrating mental health prevention with substance use prevention is more effective to address multiple factors than the creating silos of services when such services are often related.

- **Prevention for adolescent mental health integrated with existing substance abuse prevention** is crucial because adolescence is a critical developmental stage that shapes a person's future emotional, cognitive, and social well-being.

Adolescence (roughly ages 10–19) is a time of rapid brain development, identity formation, and social transition. These changes make teens more susceptible to:

- Emerging mental health conditions, such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders
- Substance use, self-harm
- Stress and emotional instability
- Peer pressure and social comparison

Early intervention helps prevent these issues from escalating into chronic mental illnesses and/or chronic substance use disorders. Research shows that half of all mental health conditions begin by age 14, but most cases go undetected and untreated.

Prevention programs can:

- Promote resilience and coping skills
- Identify early warning signs

- Encourage help-seeking behavior
- Emotional intelligence
- Empathy and communication skills
- Healthy relationships and decision-making
- Positive self-esteem
- Reduce stigma around mental health
- Better educational outcomes and school attendance
- Reduced substance abuse and violence
- Improved productivity and life satisfaction in adulthood
- Lower healthcare and social costs later in life

Many adolescents don't receive help due to:

- Lack of awareness or access to services
- Stigma and fear of judgment
- Cultural or family-related barriers

Preventive efforts—such as school-based and community-based mental health programs, peer support, and psychoeducation combined with existing substance abuse prevention programs—can bridge these gaps and normalize discussions around mental well-being and stop using substance abuse, alcohol or tobacco as coping mechanism.

A CDC/MMWR report found that among adolescents who reported using substances, alcohol, or tobacco motivations included: “to feel mellow, calm, or relaxed” (73%), “to stop worrying about a problem or forget bad memories” (44%), and “to help with depression or anxiety” (40%)

- The fact that many adolescents report using substances “to help with depression or anxiety” suggests a self-medication link between mental health issues and drug use.
- The increase in overdose deaths among youth, even if general use is down or stable, suggests that when youth do use illicit or dangerous substances, the risks (especially of severe outcomes) are rising.
- The high prevalence of mental distress (sadness/hopelessness, suicidal thinking) means a large at-risk population of youth who may be vulnerable to substance use if protective factors are lacking.

They highlight that mental health and substance use are interconnected problems, not separate silos — meaning prevention efforts must address both together.

- They suggest certain groups (e.g., teens experiencing sadness/hopelessness, anxiety, suicidal thoughts) should be considered higher-risk for substance use and thus targeted for early intervention.
- Adolescents with untreated mental health disorders (like depression, anxiety, ADHD, or trauma) are 2–3 times more likely to experiment with or regularly use illicit substances.
- Substance use can act as a form of self-medication, helping young people temporarily relieve emotional pain, anxiety, or stress.
- Over time, this pattern can lead to dependence, which further worsens their mental health.
- Depression and anxiety: Teens may use marijuana, alcohol, or stimulants to “numb” feelings of sadness or worry.
- ADHD: Impulsivity and sensation-seeking behaviors increase the likelihood of early experimentation.

- Trauma and PTSD: Some adolescents turn to drugs to manage flashbacks or emotional distress.
- Conduct disorder and oppositional defiant disorder: These often involve risk-taking and rule-breaking behaviors, which correlate with substance use.

Access to effective mental health care — therapy, counseling, medication management, and family support — can dramatically reduce the likelihood of substance use.

- School-based programs teaching emotional regulation, stress management, and refusal skills.
- Family therapy strengthens support systems and monitor behavior.
- Community programs that provide safe, engaging activities and mentorship.
- Integrated treatment for youth with both mental health and substance use disorders (often called “co-occurring disorders”).

Essentially, supporting adolescents’ mental health integrated with substance abuse prevention builds healthier communities and more resilient future generations.



HB1537 Mental Health Prevention

COMMITTEE ON HEALTH

Rep. Gregg Takayama, Chair

Rep. Sue L. Keohokapu-Lee, Vice Chair

COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES & HOMELESSNESS

Rep. Lisa Marten, Chair

Rep. Ikaika Olds, Vice Chair

Friday, Feb 6, 2026: 9:00: Room 329 Videoconference

Hina Mauka Supports HB1537:

ALOHA CHAIR, VICE CHAIR, AND DISTINGUISHED COMMITTEE MEMBERS. My name is Brian Baker. I am the President and CEO for Hina Mauka, a mental health and substance use disorder treatment and prevention agency for thousands of adults and adolescents on Oahu and Kauai, including recovery-oriented services and housing transitional living programs.

Hina Mauka is proud to **support HB1537**, because this measure addresses a gap in our system that has existed for far too long — the absence of a coordinated, statewide approach to **mental health prevention for our youth**.

In Hawai‘i, **we already invest in substance use prevention and have infrastructure.**

We have trained staff.

We have trusted relationships with schools.

We have programs embedded in communities.

What **we do not yet have is a formal, integrated mental health prevention framework** — even though we know mental health challenges and substance use are deeply connected.

Adolescence is a brief but powerful window of development.

Between the ages of 10 and 19, young people are forming their identities, navigating intense social pressures, and experiencing rapid brain development. It is also the time when many mental health conditions first appear — often quietly, and often unnoticed.

When emotional distress goes unaddressed, young people look for ways to cope.

For some, that coping takes the form of alcohol, vaping, or other substances — not to rebel, but to feel calm, to stop worrying, or to escape anxiety and depression.

National data shows that many adolescents report using substances specifically to manage emotional pain. That tells us something important: **prevention efforts cannot treat mental health and substance use as separate problems.**

Integrated prevention works because it reflects reality. Teaching coping skills, emotional regulation, and healthy decision-making reduces both mental health distress and substance use risk. Programs that build resilience, normalize help-seeking, and reduce stigma **protect young people before crises emerge.**

Just as importantly, **integrated prevention removes barriers** — cultural stigma, lack of access, and fear of judgment — that prevent many youth and families from seeking help early.

When prevention is effective, the benefits ripple outward:

- Stronger school engagement
- Reduced substance use and violence
- Healthier families
- Lower long-term healthcare and social costs

Most importantly, it gives young people the tools to thrive — not just survive.

HB1537 builds on what Hawai‘i already does well and strengthens it by bringing mental health prevention into the same coordinated framework. It is practical, cost-effective, and grounded in evidence.

Hina Mauka respectfully urges your **support** for this measure.

Mahalo for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to the well-being of Hawai‘i’s youth.



CATHOLIC CHARITIES HAWAII

SUPPORT HB 1562: RELATING TO YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH

TO: Senate Committee on Health and Human Services
FROM: Tina Andrade, President and CEO, Catholic Charities Hawai'i
Hearing: Friday, 02/06/26; 9:00am; CR 329 & Videoconference

Chair Takayama, Vice Chair Keohokapu-Lee Loy and Committee on Health and
Chair Marten, Vice Chair Olds and Committee on Human Services and Homelessness:

Catholic Charities Hawai'i **supports HB 1537**, which would provide preventive and early intervention mental health services to adolescents within the community.

Catholic Charities Hawai'i (CCH) is a tax-exempt, community-based organization that has been providing social services in Hawai'i for 78 years. Catholic Charities Hawai'i serves individuals and families across the state who are experiencing poverty, housing instability, trauma, and crisis. Increasingly, we are seeing the impact of untreated mental health challenges among children and adolescents.

HB1537 recognizes the growing mental health needs of Hawai'i's adolescents and invests in prevention and early intervention through community-based organizations. Early support during this critical developmental period can prevent the escalation of anxiety, depression, trauma, and substance use—particularly for youth impacted by housing instability, family stress, and recent disasters.

Catholic Charities Hawai'i strongly supports the bill's emphasis on community-based, culturally responsive services, which are often the most accessible and trusted supports for youth and families, especially in underserved communities and on neighbor islands. Delivering services where youth already are reduces stigma and barriers to care. By prioritizing prevention over crisis response, HB1537 reflects best practices and promotes long-term cost savings by reducing emergency room visits, hospitalizations, and justice system involvement. CCH also appreciates the bill's accountability measures, including required reporting on outcomes and use of funds.

For these reasons, Catholic Charities Hawai'i respectfully urges the Legislature to pass HB1537 and continue investing in early mental health supports that strengthen youth, families, and communities.

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide this testimony. If you have any questions, please contact our Vice President of Mission, Shellie Niles, at (808) 527-4813.





LATE

To: Committee on Health and Committee on Human Services and Homelessness

Hearing Date/Time: Friday February

Re: Testimony in Support of HB 1537

Dear Chair Takayama, Chair Marten and Members of the Committees

The Hawaii Health & Harm Reduction Center (HHRC) **supports HB 1537** which appropriates funds to the Department of Health to contract with community-based organizations to provide preventive and early intervention mental health services to adolescents within the community.

HHRC, like many behavioral health organizations, is seeing a dramatic increase in mental health challenges amongst both youth and adults. This bill would prioritize prevention and early intervention services for young adults which is desperately needed as poor mental health in our youth can lead to increases in suicide, substance use and other challenges.

HHRC's mission is to *reduce harm, promote health, create wellness and fight stigma in Hawaii and the Pacific*. We focus our efforts on those disproportionately affected by social determinants of health, including but not limited to: people living with and/or affected by HIV, hepatitis, substance use, and the transgender, LGBTQ and the Native Hawaiian communities.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Heather Lusk, Executive Director, Hawaii Health and Harm Reduction Center

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HB1537 Department of Health; Adolescent Mental Health Services; Community-Based Organizations; Prevention; Early Intervention; Report; Appropriation

6th of February, 2026
9:00 am at Conference Room 329 & Videoconference
State Capitol
415 South Beretania Street

In Support of House Bill 1537

Dear Chair Gregg Takayama, Vice Chair Sue L. Keohokapu-Lee Loy, and the Committee on Health,

My name is Kayla Munoz, and I am a social work student at UH Manoa. I am writing in support of HB1537 regarding the aim to create early prevention mental health programs for adolescents through community-based programs funded by the Department of Health.

This bill is important because it addresses the lack of mental health awareness and programs that involve youth. Within the past decade, youth in Hawai'i have gone through events such as COVID-19, the Maui fires, and school gun threats. Adolescents could also have to deal with personal traumas such as physical, verbal, and sexual abuse, as well as the dangers of social media. With a mixture of these events, a lot of adolescents have developed anxiety, depression, drug abuse, or suicide ideation, but they go unnoticed until it's too late. I grew up in an abusive household, and I had mentioned the abuse to my middle school counselor when a staff member noticed I was crying before school. My dad had hit me while dropping me off to school because of an issue I had with another student. There were no steps taken to address the abuse at home; only the issue between the other student and my life continued the same from there. The abuse had affected my performance at school and how I interact with others around me. During and after the pandemic, my performance at school took an even worse toll because of online schooling. I became less motivated for my future and did the bare minimum for school. I carried that habit up until community college, where I got on academic probation. It wasn't until I took myself to academic counseling and therapy that I had the drive to have a successful life.

Therefore, early prevention mental health services must be created so that adolescents do not fall through the cracks of society. Mental health severely affects overall well-being. It can affect their school performance, their bodily health, and how they interact and perceive their environment. How a person is raised and cared for determines how they will be in the future. If we don't care for our keiki, there will be no future leaders or any bright future for Hawai'i.

Mahalo Nui,
Kayla Munoz

Judith F. Clark
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February 4, 2026

To: Representative Gregg Takayama, Chair,
And members of the Committee on Health

Representative Lisa Marten, Chair,
And members of the Committee on Human Services and Homelessness

Testimony in Support of HB 1537 Relating to Mental Health

As a community advocate and the former Executive Director of Hawaii Youth Services Network, I support HB 1537 which appropriates funds for preventive and early intervention mental health services to adolescents.

35% of middle and high school youth in Hawai'i experience persistent depression; 7% of high school and 11% of middle school students in Hawai'i reported having attempted suicide. 23% of middle school students report that their mental health was most of the time or always "not good" in the prior 30 days.

The TeenLink Hawai'i website continues to get 2,000 site visits on average each month. The top topics/pages visited included Suicide; Health and Wellness Toolkit; Sleep; Stress; Mental Health; and Self- Care.

This bill would enable community-based organizations to provide a range of services that support positive youth development and family strengthening. It will decrease the need for more costly and intensive mental health treatment. It will reduce future dependence on public assistance or involvement in the criminal justice system.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,



Judith F. Clark, MPH

LATE

HB-1537

Submitted on: 2/5/2026 12:15:29 PM

Testimony for HLT on 2/6/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Ana Kia	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

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

I am writing in strong support of HB1537. Investing in early prevention and community-based mental health supports for our youth is one of the most impactful steps we can take to strengthen the long-term well-being of our communities. Too often, young people only receive support once challenges have already escalated. Expanding access to early intervention services helps normalize conversations around mental health, connects youth to trusted resources sooner, and builds stronger protective factors across families and schools.

This bill reflects a proactive, community-centered approach that will help Hawai'i continue moving toward a more resilient and healthier future for our keiki. Mahalo for the opportunity to provide testimony in support.