



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

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

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

Tuesday, March 17, 2026 at 9:55 a.m.
Hawai‘i State Capitol, Conference Room 016

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

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 amendments made by the House Committee on Judiciary and 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

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.



STATE OF HAWAII
OFFICE OF WELLNESS AND RESILIENCE
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
415 S. BERETANIA ST. #415
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96813

Testimony on H.B. 1565 HD2
RELATING TO CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

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

March 17, 2026, at 9:55 a.m.; Room Number: 016

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 Hawai'i's transition toward becoming a trauma-informed state. As the state agency that administered the Mālama 'Ohana 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 'Ohana 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 'Ohana 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 H.D.2 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.

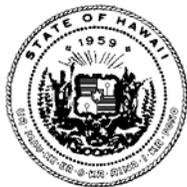
Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this important measure.

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

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.

JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR
KE KIA'ĀINA



RYAN I. YAMANE
DIRECTOR
KA LUNA HO'OKELE

JOSEPH CAMPOS II
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
KA HOPE LUNA HO'OKELE

STATE OF HAWAII
KA MOKU'ĀINA O HAWAI'I
DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES
KA 'OIHANA MĀLAMA LAWELawe KANAKA
Office of the Director
P. O. Box 339
Honolulu, Hawaii 96809-0339

TRISTA SPEER
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
KA HOPE LUNA HO'OKELE

March 16, 2026

TO: The Honorable Senator Karl Rhoads, Chair
Senate Committee on Judiciary

FROM: Ryan I. Yamane, Director

SUBJECT: HB 1565 HD2 – RELATING TO CHILD WELFARE SERVICES.

Hearing: March 17, 2026, 9:55 a.m.
Conference Room 016 & via Videoconference, State Capitol

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: The Department of Human Services (DHS) supports this measure and defers to the Judiciary.

The bill establishes a working group to implement recommendations from the Malama Ohana Working Group, established by Act 86, Session Laws of Hawaii 2023, to improve family court processes, including access to legal representation for youth in the child welfare system.

A representative from DHS Child Welfare Services will serve on the work group.

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



TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 1565 HD2
RELATING TO CHILD WELFARE SERVICES

Ke Kōmike ‘Aha Kenekoa o ka Ho‘okolokolo
(Senate Committee on Judiciary)

Ke Kapitala ‘o Hawai‘i
(Hawai‘i State Capitol)

Malaki 17, 2026

9:55 AM

Lumi 016

Aloha e Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, a me Members of Ke Kōmike ‘Aha Kenekoa o ka Ho‘okolokolo:

The Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) **SUPPORTS HB1565 HD2** which establishes and funds a judiciary working group to improve family court processes in child welfare cases, including access to legal representation for youth.

OHA supports the transformation goals identified by the Mālama ‘Ohana Working Group and the call for a child welfare system that is trauma-informed, community-centered, and responsive to the lived experiences of keiki and ‘ohana. Strengthening court process and improving youth access to information, participation, and legal representation is a core part of that work. Youth with lived experience in the child welfare system have reported feeling unheard, under-informed, and excluded from decisions affecting their safety, placement, and future. This measure takes a practical step toward addressing those concerns by creating a focused working group to examine court practice, review youth counsel models, and identify implementable pathways for reform.

From a Native Hawaiian well-being perspective, child welfare decisions can carry profound and multigenerational consequences. Court processes that elevate youth voice, reduce delay, and ensure meaningful representation better support family connection, stability, and long-term outcomes. These goals are consistent with culturally grounded approaches that emphasize relationship, dignity, and shared responsibility. OHA also appreciates the inclusion of a broad cross-system working group and preserves meaningful participation from those with lived experience. The inclusion of youth and parent voices,

along with paid compensation for lived experience members, helps ensure the process is informed not only by institutions, but by those most directly affected.

Improving how youth are represented and heard in court will strengthen fairness, transparency, and trust in the child welfare system and support better safety and permanency outcomes. For these reasons, the Office of Hawaiian Affairs respectfully urges this Committee to **PASS HB1565 HD2**.

Mahalo nui for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important measure.



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

Senate Committee on Judiciary

March 17, 2026

Chair Rhoads and Members of the Senate Committee on Judiciary:

The [National Association of Counsel for Children \(NACC\)](#)¹ strongly supports [House Bill 1565 HD2](#) [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 ‘Ohana 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 Hawai‘i’s child welfare system *directly* inspired by community members with personal experience within foster care.

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 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

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.

zealously pursue the client’s agenda—an agenda developed by the child’s lived experience and understanding of their own family.

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 can mean [cost savings](#)² for the state.

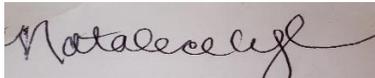
The federal government promotes and funds counsel for youth. In 2017, the U.S. Children’s Bureau (CB), the federal agency responsible for child protection, issued an [Information Memorandum](#) that encouraged the appointment of high-quality child attorney’s as “critical to a well-functioning child welfare 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.

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.

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 youth models in other jurisdictions and identifying best practices for statewide implementation. We urge you to support HB 1565-HD2.

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.

Sincerely,

A rectangular image showing a handwritten signature in black ink on a light-colored background. The signature is cursive and appears to read "Natalece Washington".

Natalece Washington

Policy Counsel

National Association for Counsel for Children

Natalece.washington@NACCchildlaw.org

www.counselforkids.org

(404) 954-2427

To: Senate Committee on Judiciary
RE: **HB1565 HD2 – Relating to Child Welfare Services**
Hawaii State Capitol & Via Videoconference
March 17, 2026; 9:55am

Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, and members of the committee,

On behalf of Hawai'i Children's Action Network (HCAN) Speaks!, I'm writing in **SUPPORT of HB1565 HD2**, which establishes a working group within the Judiciary to improve family court processes, including access to legal representation for youth in the child welfare system.

By establishing a working group to advance access to legal representation for foster youth in the child welfare system, this bill is one important step towards ensuring that youth 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 would include individuals who have direct, personal experience with the state child welfare system during their youth. The bill would also include an appropriation to the Judiciary for purposes such as conducting site visits, drafting required reports, retaining a neutral working group facilitator, and providing stipends or other compensation to working group members who have lived experience with the child welfare system.

Youth with legal counsel have better outcomes, including being 40% more likely to exit the foster system within 6 months, 45% more likely to reunify with biological parents, and having 65% fewer unnecessary school moves.¹

Firsthand accounts shared by youth lived experts² in Hawai'i as well as national research³ demonstrate that legal counsel helps improve the safety and well-being of youth involved in the child welfare system. These young people deserve to have their voices heard and to be listened to, and access to legal counsel would ensure that happens.

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide this testimony. Please pass this bill.

Sincerely,

Nicole Woo
Director of Research and Economic Policy

¹ National Association of Counsel for Children (URL: <https://improvechildrep.org/Home.aspx>)

² Mālama 'Ohana Working Group Final Report and Recommendations (URL: <https://www.malamaohana.net/>)

³ National Association of Counsel for Children (URL: <https://improvechildrep.org/Home.aspx>)

HB-1565-HD-2

Submitted on: 3/15/2026 10:25:11 PM

Testimony for JDC on 3/17/2026 9:55:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Sonia Blackiston	Testifying for Hawaii Youth Services Network	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Committee Chairs,

Hawaii Youth Services Network supports HB 1565 HD 2, which will establish and fund a working group to improve family court processes and help ensure young people in the child welfare system, have an attorney who can support them in understanding their rights, amplify their voices in court and support them through complex, life-changing decisions. Research shows that youth with legal representation experience greater stability, safety and long-term well-being.

HYSN strongly urges support of this meaningful step to ensure young people are truly seen, heard, and supported.

Mahalo,

Sonia Blackiston, Executive Director, Hawaii Youth Services Network

Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i

KAWAIILOA

March 17, 2026

Senate Committee on Judiciary

Hearing Time: 9:55AM

Location: Conference Room 016

Re: HB1565 HD2, Relating to Child Welfare Services

Aloha e Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard and members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i hui, we are writing in **strong support of HB1565 HD2, relating to child welfare services, with amendments**. This bill establishes a working group within the Judiciary to improve family court processes, including access to legal representation for youth in the child welfare system, and appropriates funds for the working group.

In Child Welfare cases, the Hawai'i Child Protective Act, HRS § 587A-16, requires the court to appoint a Guardian ad Litem ("GAL"), and in some cases a Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA), to advocate for the best interests of the children involved in the case. The GAL or CASA also recommends plans for the family to follow that align with those interests and communicate the child's preferences to the court.

Children involved in child welfare cases may not understand what is happening to them or their family, why they are in court, or the consequences of decisions being made on their behalf. Court can be frightening and intimidating, especially for children unfamiliar with the legal system and its complexities. This often makes it difficult for children to know when or how to express their concerns, opinions, or feelings, to ask questions, or to know whom to trust. Even when they feel confident enough to speak up, there are often situations in which what a GAL or CASA believes is in the child's best interest conflicts with what the child truly wants, leaving the child feeling hopeless and silenced. Thus, regardless of whether a child fully understands the child welfare system or can adequately express and advocate for themselves, the outcomes of these cases directly shape their lives.

Thus, HB1565 HD2 addresses the fact that many Child Welfare youth believed they were not well informed about decisions made on their behalf and felt that their voices were neither acknowledged nor included in those decisions. They felt that their safety concerns, when expressed, were disregarded and that their rights were not protected. Child welfare cases involve real lives with real children whose futures could be significantly impacted by what happens to them in their court case. Thus, by prioritizing improvements to family court processes, including legal representation for youth, this bill underscores the need to provide youth with better guidance through the court system as they face some life-altering decisions.

We request that the following amendments be made to HB1565 HD2 regarding the composition of the working group. A GAL who works very closely with youth involved in Child Welfare cases should remain part of the composition. Their perspectives, along with those of the rest of the working group members, are essential to developing solutions that truly support the children, foster collaboration among all organizations and individuals who work with youth and their families, and include the voices of the youth and families directly affected by the decisions and outcomes of the Child Welfare system.

Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i is a collaboration of organizations and individuals committed to reducing the harmful effects of a punitive incarceration system for youth; promoting equity in the justice

system; and improving and increasing resources to address adolescent and young adult mental health needs. We seek to improve the continuity of programs and services for youth and young adults transitioning from minor to adult status; eliminate youth homelessness and housing market discrimination against young adults; and promote and fund more holistic and culturally informed approaches among public/private agencies serving youth.



Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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



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

My name is Kanioloihooouniamaikaainaloha “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.

Kanioloihooouniamaikaainaloha “Aina” Torcato



Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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

1130 N. Nimitz Hwy., Ste. C-210 Honolulu, HI 96817
Phone: (808)838 - 7752 | Email: epic@epicohana.org





Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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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Phone: (808)838 - 7752 | Email: epic@epicohana.org





Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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

1130 N. Nimitz Hwy., Ste. C-210 Honolulu, HI 96817
Phone: (808)838 - 7752 | Email: epic@epicohana.org





Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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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Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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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Keira Arcangel

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HB-1565-HD-2

Submitted on: 3/15/2026 7:35:07 PM

Testimony for JDC on 3/17/2026 9:55:00 AM

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

Comments:

I support this bill.

HB-1565-HD-2

Submitted on: 3/15/2026 7:35:47 PM

Testimony for JDC on 3/17/2026 9:55:00 AM

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

Comments:

I support this bill.



Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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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Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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

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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



Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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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Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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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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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Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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 HD2 with amendments**, 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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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 HD2 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 HD2 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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HB-1565-HD-2

Submitted on: 3/12/2026 3:53:23 PM

Testimony for JDC on 3/17/2026 9:55:00 AM

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.

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

March 13, 2026

To: Senator Karl Rhoads, Chair,
And members of the Committee on Judiciary

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 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.

Hawai'i 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

Aloha Chair Rhoads, Vice Chair Gabbard, 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

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

HEARING: Tuesday, March 17, 2026 at 9:55 AM
Conference Room 016

FROM: Sharla-Ann Houlding, LCSW

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.

Over the last 17 years working with youth and families involved in the child welfare system, I have consistently heard young people express that they feel uninformed and excluded from their own child welfare case. Many have reported being left out of case planning and court proceedings, feeling as though their voices do not matter in decisions that directly impact where they live, who they see, and what their future looks like. Even more concerning is the fact that some young adults have shared that when they attempted to voice safety concerns, those concerns were dismissed or minimized—leaving them even more vulnerable and exposed to continued harm.

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.

While the majority of states around the country guarantee legal representation for all children involved in the child welfare system, there are many that still do not, Hawai'i being one of them. 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. It is our 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.

By passing this bill, Hawai'i 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.

I respectfully ask that the Committee pass HB1565, HD 2 to ensure that our children in the child welfare system are equipped with the proper tools and resources to navigate a very complex system and learn to advocate for their rights. Thank you for your time, consideration, and for the opportunity to testify.

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

With my deepest gratitude and aloha,
Sharla-Ann Houlding, LCSW

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

My name is Melissa Mayo, and I am submitting testimony in strong support of **HB1565**, which establishes a working group to improve family court processes, including access to legal representation for youth involved in the child welfare system.

I am a former foster youth and a proud former member of the Mālama ‘Ohana Working Group, which was tasked with seeking, designing, and recommending transformative changes to Hawai‘i’s existing child welfare system. I am also the former chair of the Keiki and ‘Opio Permitted Interaction Group. In addition, I bring over eight years of experience in youth advocacy work, supporting and uplifting the voices of young people navigating systems that make life-altering decisions on their behalf.

Through both my lived experience and my advocacy work, I have often shared my belief that Hawai‘i’s child welfare system operates as a system of luck. While I consider myself fortunate to have had a guardian ad litem and social worker who valued my voice and supported me during my time in foster care, I know many others have not been as lucky. This disparity fuels my passion for ensuring that every young person in Hawai‘i’s foster care system has access to the resources and support they need—not just to survive, but to thrive and live meaningful lives.

Throughout my time as a member of the Mālama ‘Ohana Working Group and the Keiki and ‘Opio Permitted Interaction Group, I listened to many stories from youth whose experiences in the foster care system were marked by a lack of resources, support, and connection to family. Many of the young people I spoke with urged those working with youth in foster care to *“stop making decisions about our lives without even hearing from us.”* They shared that having a supportive adult who listened, advocated for their needs, and valued their input could have significantly improved their experience in care.

HB1565 is a vital step toward ensuring that no young person’s future is left to chance. By establishing this working group, the State can build on prior recommendations and focus on improving access to legal representation for youth—advocates who will prioritize their voices, rights, and well-being. This is especially critical in a system where major decisions about a young person’s life, including family separation, placement changes, and school moves, are often made without their meaningful participation.

Through my continued work advocating for improved outcomes for youth in foster care, I have seen how centering youth voice leads to more just, effective, and humane systems. In listening sessions and conversations with current and former foster youth, the need for trusted advocates—particularly legal advocates—has been consistently clear.

Research confirms what lived experiences already tell us:

- Children with access to trained legal counsel are 40% more likely to achieve permanency within six months and experience a 45% higher rate of reunification with their families.
- Legal representation reduces unnecessary placements, school moves, and the trauma associated with instability.

Thank you for your time, dedication, and commitment to improving the lives of Hawai'i's foster youth. I respectfully urge your support of HB1565.

Mahalo nui loa,

Melissa Mayo
Former Foster Youth

HB-1565-HD-2

Submitted on: 3/16/2026 9:55:40 AM

Testimony for JDC on 3/17/2026 9:55:00 AM

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

Comments:

Aloha House Chair, Co-Chair, and Members of the Judiciary 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