



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

Testimony on S.B. 2861 SD1
RELATING TO THE OFFICE OF WELLNESS AND RESILIENCE

Senator Donovan Dela Cruz, Chair
Senator Sharon Moriwaki, Vice Chair
Senate Committee on Ways and Means

February 19, 2026, at 10:30 a.m.; Room Number: 211

The Office of Wellness and Resilience (OWR) supports S.B. 2861 SD1 and humbly offers comments.

S.B. 2861 SD1 establishes the Kakou Pilot Program within the OWR to support families in need. To ensure the program can be implemented effectively and in alignment with the mandates outlined in the measure, OWR respectfully requests the following amendments:

- 1) **Provide a one year planning period** for OWR to develop a comprehensive implementation and administrative plan for the pilot program. Because the bill modifies eligibility requirements under Act 127, OWR will need to work closely with the Department of Human Services' (DHS) MedQUEST Division to develop and adopt new administrative rules and implementation processes. This work requires thoughtful coordination and adequate time to ensure successful execution.
- 2) **Include an external evaluator** to conduct independent data collection and assessment of the pilot program.
- 3) **Add one fulltime equivalent (1.0 FTE) position** within OWR dedicated to managing, monitoring and supporting the pilot program.

Given the State's current fiscal climate, in which resources must be carefully stewarded, OWR deeply appreciates the bill's intent to leverage available federal funds to support Hawai'i's families and keiki. OWR respectfully defers to DHS's Benefit, Employment and Support Services Division (BESSD) regarding the eligible use of Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.

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

THE SENATE
THIRTY-THIRD LEGISLATURE, 2026
STATE OF HAWAII

S.B. NO.

2861
S.D. 1
Proposed
S.D. 2
(DHS)

A BILL FOR AN ACT

RELATING TO THE OFFICE OF WELLNESS AND RESILIENCE.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF HAWAII:

1 SECTION 1. The legislature finds that the State has
2 accumulated an estimated \$470,000,000 in unspent temporary
3 assistance for needy families **program** funding with approximately
4 \$333,000,000 in encumbrances on that funding. These moneys are
5 required to be spent on needy families **that meet the eligibility**
6 **requirements of the temporary assistance for needy families**
7 **program. and families that are especially susceptible to charges**
8 **of neglect for failure to provide shelter, supervision, and**
9 **other necessities for their children.**

10 Accordingly, the purpose of this Act is to:

11 **(1)** Utilize some of the unspent and unencumbered federal
12 assistance moneys to establish within the office of wellness and
13 resilience a kakou pilot program to support families and
14 children in need. ~~and~~

15 ~~(2) Expand eligibility for the \$50 benefit provided under~~
16 ~~the Child Wellness Incentive Pilot Program established by Act~~
17 ~~127, Session Laws of Hawaii 2022, to include families ineligible~~
18 ~~for state Medicaid benefits.~~

1 SECTION 2. (a) There is established within the office of
2 wellness and resilience the responsibility to develop a
3 comprehensive plan for the establishment of a kakou pilot
4 program to support families and children in need.

5 (b) The kakou pilot program shall create a plan to:

6 (1) Provide services for children in need, including child
7 wellness visits;

8 (2) Distribute food boxes to eligible families, as needed;

9 (3) Provide counseling and related support services to
10 eligible families with a focus on families exiting a foster
11 family placement;

12 (4) Administer trauma-informed care services to vulnerable
13 families and children in danger of neglect; and

14 (5) Provide any other related services to support families
15 and children in need in accordance with this Act.

16 (c) The office of wellness and resilience may adopt
17 policies and procedures necessary to implement the kakou pilot
18 program and to carry out the purposes of this Act.

19 (d) The office of wellness and resilience shall submit a
20 report of its findings and recommendations on the development of
21 establishing a kakou pilot program, including any proposed
22 legislation and recommendations on whether the program should
23 continue, to the legislature no later than twenty days prior to
24 the convening of the regular session of 2027.

25 (e) The office of wellness and resilience may
26 expend temporary assistance for needy families (TANF) funds for
27 the purposes of the pilot program, including \$130,000 per year
28 for an external evaluator to conduct data collection and
29 assessment. of a program that meets at least one of the purposes
30 of the temporary assistance for needy families program and its
31 effectiveness in addressing the purpose.

1 (f) The kakou pilot program shall cease to exist on June
2 30, 2027.

3 (g) There is established within the office of wellness and
4 resilience a one full-time equivalent (1.0 FTE) program
5 specialist IV position.

6 (h) For the purposes of this Act, "eligible families"
7 means families who meet eligibility criteria for receiving
8 support from the temporary assistance for needy families
9 program, and any other families meeting standards and
10 requirements established by the office of wellness and
11 resilience.

12 ~~SECTION 3. Act 127, Session Laws of Hawaii 2022, is~~
13 ~~amended by amending section 1 as follows:~~

14 ~~1. By amending subsection (b) to read:~~

15 ~~"(b) The pilot program shall pay \$50 to each [state~~
16 ~~medicaid benefit] eligible recipient for each~~
17 ~~completed well child examination of that recipient parent's~~
18 ~~child; provided that only one payment may be made per child each~~
19 ~~year."~~

20 ~~2. By amending subsection (c) by adding a new definition~~
21 ~~to be appropriately inserted and to read:~~

22 ~~"Eligible recipient" means a parent receiving support from~~
23 ~~the temporary assistance for needy families program, and any~~
24 ~~other parent meeting standards and requirements established by~~
25 ~~the office of wellness and resilience."~~

26 SECTION 34. If any part of this Act is found to be in
27 conflict with federal requirements that are a prescribed
28 condition for the allocation of federal funds to the State, the
29 conflicting part of this Act is inoperative solely to the extent
30 of the conflict and with respect to the agencies directly
31 affected, and this finding does not affect the operation of the

1 remainder of this Act in its application to the agencies
2 concerned.

3 SECTION 5. Statutory material to be repealed is bracketed
4 and stricken. New statutory material is underscored.

5 SECTION 6. This Act shall take effect upon its approval,
6 and shall be repealed on June 30th, 2027.

7

8 **Report Title:**

9 OWR; Kakou Pilot Program; TANF; Child Wellness Visits; Food
10 Boxes; Supportive Services; Wellness Benefit; Foster Family
11 Placement; Med-QUEST; Child Wellness Incentive Pilot Program;
12 Eligible Recipient

13

14 **Description:**

15 Establishes within the Office of Wellness and Resilience the
16 Kakou Pilot Program to support families and children in
17 need. Expands eligibility for the \$50 benefit under the Child
18 Wellness Incentive Pilot Program established by Act 127, SLH
19 2022, to include families ineligible for state Medicaid
20 benefits. (SD1)

21

22

23

24 *The summary description of legislation appearing on this page is for informational purposes*
25 *only and is not legislation or evidence of legislative intent.*

26

27

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
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Honolulu, Hawaii 96809-0339

TRISTA SPEER
DEPUTY DIRECTOR
KA HOPE LUNA HO'OKELE

February 18, 2026

TO: The Honorable Senator Donovan Dela Cruz, Chair
Senate Committee on Ways and Means

FROM: Ryan I. Yamane, Director

SUBJECT: **SB2861 SDI – RELATING TO THE OFFICE OF WELLNESS AND RESILIENCE**

Hearing: Thursday, February 19, 2026, 10:30 a.m.
Conference Room 211 & Via Videoconference, State Capitol

DEPARTMENT'S POSITION: The Department of Human Services (DHS) supports the intent of the bill with proposed amendments. DHS offers comments, requests clarification, and proposes amendments. DHS defers to the Office of Wellness and Resilience (OWR). DHS respectfully requests that the proposed pilot program and any appropriation not conflict with, reduce, or replace priorities identified in the executive budget.

This bill proposes to utilize federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) funds to establish within the OWR the Kakou Pilot Program to expand the eligibility for the \$50 incentive payments provided under the Hawaii Child Wellness Incentive Program (HCWIP) established by Act 127, Session Laws of Hawaii 2022, to include families who are ineligible for state Medicaid benefits. In addition, through the Kakou Pilot Program, the bill proposes to provide food boxes, counseling, trauma-informed care services, and other related supportive services to eligible families and children.

For the committee's information, in 2025, the DHS Child Welfare Services Branch (CWSB) initiated its Kāko'o Program to provide wellness visits and food boxes to children in

foster care and to assess resource needs to enhance supportive services for children. The Kāko‘o Program is supported with federal Title IV-E funds and focuses on children and families involved in child welfare cases.

The DHS Med-QUEST Division (MQD) successfully implemented the HCWIP, which provides \$50 incentive payments, in the form of gift cards, to parents who are Medicaid recipients for each of their children who completes a well-child examination each year. Medicaid eligibility requires meeting the applicable income threshold and being a U.S. citizen or a qualified immigrant. To implement this program, MQD promulgated administrative rules, developed application and card issuance processes, modified systems, and conducted public outreach. Unfortunately, the rules and processes are not easily portable between divisions or agencies. At this time, MQD and the Benefit, Employment and Support Services Division (BESSD) that administers TANF, are focused on implementing provisions of the One Big Beautiful Bill Act (OBBBA), Public Law 119-21, and do not have the necessary resources to facilitate a transfer or expansion. For these reasons, we respectfully request that paragraph (2) in the purpose section and Section 3 of the measure be deleted in its entirety.

For the services described in Section 2, a determination must be made as to whether one of the four TANF purposes is met to expend the federal TANF funds. As required by federal law and to clarify what is described in the bill’s preamble (see request to strike language below), the four TANF purposes are:

- (1) Provide assistance to needy families so children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives;
- (2) End the dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;
- (3) Prevent and reduce the incidence of out-of-wedlock pregnancies; and
- (4) Encourage the formation and maintenance of two-parent families.

If the services are intended to qualify under purposes one or two, “means testing” for TANF eligibility is required.

If the bill proceeds as drafted, DHS requests clarification regarding the services listed in Section 2(b). As written, the Department is unable to determine whether the services in paragraph (1), related support services in paragraph (3), trauma-informed care services in paragraph (4), and other related services in paragraph (5) meet a TANF purpose.

Additionally, in accordance with 8 U.S.C. 1611(a), an individual who is not a qualified immigrant is not eligible for any federal public benefit as defined in 8 U.S.C. 1611(c). Therefore, children and families who may receive incentive payments or supportive services through the Kakou Pilot Program must be either U.S. citizens, qualified immigrants according to the terms described in section 101(a) of the Immigration and Nationality Act [8 U.S.C. 1101 et seq.], or qualified individuals lawfully residing in the U.S. in accordance with the Compacts of Free Association.

Respectfully, DHS proposes the following **highlighted** amendments, which incorporate OWR's proposed (underscored) amendments:

SECTION 1. The legislature finds that the State has accumulated an estimated \$470,000,000 in unspent temporary assistance for needy families **program** funding with approximately \$333,000,000 in encumbrances on that funding. These moneys are required to be spent on needy families ~~and families that are especially susceptible to charges of neglect for failure to provide shelter, supervision, and other necessities for their children.~~ that meet the eligibility requirements of the temporary assistance for needy families program.

Accordingly, the purpose of this Act is to:

~~(1)~~ Utilize some of the unspent and unencumbered federal assistance moneys to establish within the office of wellness and resilience a kakou pilot program to support families and children in need. ~~and~~

~~(2)~~ ~~Expand eligibility for the \$50 benefit provided under the Child Wellness Incentive Pilot Program established by Act 127, Session Laws of Hawaii 2022, to include families ineligible for state Medicaid benefits.~~

SECTION 2. (a) There is established within the office of wellness and resilience the responsibility to develop a comprehensive plan for the establishment of a kakou pilot program to support families and children in need.

(b) The kakou pilot program shall create a plan to:

(1) Provide services for children in need, including child wellness visits;

- (2) Distribute food boxes to eligible families, as needed;
- (3) Provide counseling and related support services to eligible families with a focus on families exiting a foster family placement;
- (4) Administer trauma-informed care services to vulnerable families and children in danger of neglect; and
- (5) Provide any other related services to support families and children in need in accordance with this Act.

(c) The office of wellness and resilience may adopt policies and procedures necessary to implement the kakou pilot program and to carry out the purposes of this Act.

(d) The office of wellness and resilience shall submit a report of its findings and recommendations on the development of establishing a kakou pilot program, including any proposed legislation and recommendations on whether the program should continue, to the legislature no later than twenty days prior to the convening of the regular session of 2027.

(e) The office of wellness and resilience may expend temporary assistance for needy families (TANF) funds for the purposes of the pilot program, including \$130,000 per year for an external evaluator to conduct data collection and assessment- of a program that meets at least one of the purposes of the temporary assistance for needy families program and its effectiveness in addressing the purpose.

(f) The kakou pilot program shall cease to exist on June 30, 2027.

(g) For the purposes of this Act, "eligible families" means families receiving support from who meet eligibility criteria for the temporary assistance for needy families program, and or any other families meeting standards and requirements established by the office of wellness and resilience.

SECTION 3. Act 127, Session Laws of Hawaii 2022, is amended by amending section 1 as follows:

1. By amending subsection (b) to read:

"(b) The pilot program shall pay \$50 to each [state medicaid benefit] eligible recipient for each completed well-child

~~examination of that recipient parent's child; provided that only one payment may be made per child each year."~~

~~2. By amending subsection (c) by adding a new definition to be appropriately inserted and to read:~~

~~"Eligible recipient" means a parent receiving support from the temporary assistance for needy families program, and any other parent meeting standards and requirements established by the office of wellness and resilience."~~

SECTION 3. If any part of this Act is found to be in conflict with federal requirements that are a prescribed condition for the allocation of federal funds to the State, the conflicting part of this Act is inoperative solely to the extent of the conflict and with respect to the agencies directly affected, and this finding does not affect the operation of the remainder of this Act in its application to the agencies concerned.

SECTION 4. Statutory material to be repealed is bracketed and stricken. New statutory material is underscored.

SECTION 5. This Act shall take effect upon its approval, and shall be repealed on June 30th, 2027.

Please note that TANF funds are not authorized for planning purposes. As the measure progresses, the Department will continue to update its testimony to reflect resource needs.

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

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~~(2)~~ ~~Expand eligibility for the \$50 benefit provided under the Child Wellness Incentive Pilot Program established by Act 127, Session Laws of Hawaii 2022, to include families ineligible for state Medicaid benefits.~~

SECTION 2. (a) There is established within the office of wellness and resilience the responsibility to develop a comprehensive plan for the establishment of a kakou pilot program to support families and children in need.

(b) The kakou pilot program shall create a plan to:

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(c) The office of wellness and resilience may adopt policies and procedures necessary to implement the kakou pilot program and to carry out the purposes of this Act.

(d) The office of wellness and resilience shall submit a report of its findings and recommendations on the development of establishing a kakou pilot program, including any proposed legislation and recommendations on whether the program should continue, to the legislature no later than twenty days prior to the convening of the regular session of 2027.

(e) The office of wellness and resilience may expend temporary assistance for needy families (TANF) funds for the purposes of the pilot program, including \$130,000 per year for an external evaluator to conduct data collection and assessment- of a program that meets at least one of the purposes of the temporary assistance for needy families program and its effectiveness in addressing the purpose.

(f) The kakou pilot program shall cease to exist on June 30, 2027.

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1. By amending subsection (b) to read:

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Please note that TANF funds are not authorized for planning purposes. As the measure progresses, the Department will continue to update its testimony to reflect resource needs.

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



February 13, 2026

**Testimony in Support of S.B. 2861 SD1
Relating to the Office of Wellness and Resilience**

Aloha Chair Dela Cruz, Vice Chair Moriwaki, and members of the Committee,

Aloha United Way stands in strong support of S.B. 2861, which establishes the Kākou Pilot Program within the Office of Wellness and Resilience to support families and children in need.

In Hawai'i, approximately 40%¹ of households are below the ALICE (Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed) threshold. These are working families who earn above the federal poverty level but still cannot afford basic necessities. The ALICE Household Survival Budget for a family of four exceeds \$110,000² annually, placing many families with children one emergency away from crisis.

S.B. 2861 SD1 makes a smart, preventive investment by directing unspent TANF funds toward child wellness visits, food assistance, counseling, and trauma-informed supports for vulnerable families. These upstream supports help stabilize families early, reduce the need for costly and more extensive interventions in the future, and improve the health and economic outcomes for children.

Expanding eligibility for the child wellness incentive reflects the reality that many working families fall just outside traditional safety-net thresholds, yet still face significant need.

We urge you to support S.B.2861 SD1.

Mahalo,

Michelle Bartell
President & CEO
Aloha United Way

¹ <https://www.auw.org/about/alice-initiative/alice-reports/>

² <https://www.unitedforalice.org/the-cost-of-basics/hawaii>

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

February 14, 2026

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

Testimony in Support of SB 2861 SD 1 Relating to the Office of Wellness and Resilience

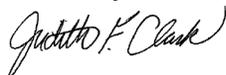
As a community advocate and the former Executive Director of Hawaii Youth Services Network who worked for non-profit organizations for 50 years, I support SB 2861 SD 1 which establishes a pilot program to support families in need.

I served as a member of the Hawaii Trauma-Informed Care Task Force from its inception and on the Office of Wellness and Resilience Advisory Board through December 2025.. Over the past 4 years, the task force has developed a plan and strategies that will incorporate trauma-informed approaches to services provided to children, youth, and families.

This Kakou Pilot Program will utilize peer navigators, an evidence-informed practice, to help families identify needs and access services. It will provide material assistance to support basic needs. By strengthening families, it will reduce the overload of the Child Welfare System.

Thank you for this opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,



Judith F. Clark, MPH

Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i

KAWAIILOA

February 17, 2026

Senate Committee on Ways & Means

Hearing Time: 10:30AM

Location: Conference Room 211

Re: SB2861 SD1, Relating to the Office of Wellness and Resilience

Aloha e Chair Dela Cruz, Vice Chair Moriwaki and members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Opportunity for Youth Action Hawai'i hui, we are writing in **strong support of SB2861 SD1, relating to the Office of Wellness and Resilience (OWR)**. This bill establishes within the Office of Wellness and Resilience the Kakou Pilot Program, which is designed to support families and children in need, expands the eligibility for the \$50 benefit under the Child Wellness Incentive Pilot Program established by Act 127, SLH 2022, to include families ineligible for state Medicaid benefits, and through adding additional language, authorizes OWR to expend temporary assistance for needy family (TANF) funds for the Kakou Pilot Program.

Poverty affects many communities nationwide. Particularly in Hawai'i, the high cost of living relative to low incomes and limited opportunities for residents makes it extremely difficult for families to remain in Hawai'i and live sustainably and comfortably. Hawai'i's kama'āina often feel they have no choice but to relocate to other states with more affordable housing and living opportunities. The reality is that many of Hawai'i's people are "priced out of paradise." Approximately 40% of Hawai'i's households are below the Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed (ALICE) threshold. This means that although many of Hawai'i's families work hard to survive Hawai'i's living circumstances, they earn just above the federal poverty line, making them ineligible for support and benefits that could help meet their needs. Also, despite earning above the poverty line, these families still struggle to survive and make ends meet, living paycheck to paycheck and often unable to afford basic necessities.

Therefore, SB2861 SD1 gives Hawai'i's families a fighting chance to remain and survive Hawai'i by introducing the Kakou Pilot Program, which will provide support to families and children in need, expanding the eligibility for the \$50 benefit to include Medicaid-ineligible families, and allowing OWR to expend TANF funds for those families involved in the program. This measure will also direct unspent TANF funds toward child wellness visits, food assistance, counseling, and trauma-informed supports to help these vulnerable families. SB2861 SD1 prioritizes Hawai'i's families and their needs, underscoring that more must be done to ensure they are supported and cared for, and have the opportunity to remain in Hawai'i.

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 houselessness and housing market discrimination against young adults; and promote and fund more holistic and culturally informed approaches among public/private agencies serving youth.

1099 Alakea Street, Suite 2530 | Honolulu, Hawaii 96813 | (808) 447-1840