



# UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

## ‘ŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAII

### Legislative Testimony

#### Hō'ike Mana'o I Mua O Ka 'Aha'ōlelo

Testimony Presented Before the  
House Committee on Higher Education  
Monday, March 16, 2026 at 2:00 p.m.

By

Denise Eby Konan, Dean  
College of Social Services

and

Vassilis Syrmos, PhD  
Interim Provost  
University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

### SB 2969 SD1 – RELATING TO THE MAUI WILDFIRE EXPOSURE STUDY AND MAUI HEALTH REGISTRY

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

The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (UH) is in strong support of the intent of SB 2969 SD1. SB 2969 SD1 would appropriate funds for UH to sustain and expand services provided by the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) and Maui Health Registry. The initiatives were established in response to the devastating August 2023 Maui wildfires, which caused more than 100 deaths and significant toxic exposures and health trauma to survivors. These survivors include children, the elderly, first responders and medically vulnerable populations.

Funding will support expanded MauiWES services and long-term follow-up for thousands of individuals, building on the existing comprehensive biomonitoring effort that has already provided medical and mental health screenings and referrals to over 2,000 residents.

The MauiWES team is co-led by UH Mānoa College of Social Sciences (CSS) and the UH John A. Burns School of Medicine, in partnership with several units at UH. The program is administered by the UH Mānoa CSS Social Sciences Research Institute and UH Economic Research Organization (UHERO).

UH and its community partners are uniquely positioned to lead this work, integrating education, research and service in direct partnership with the community. The program actively trains and employs students and early-career professionals across medicine, nursing, public health, social sciences, environmental science, and data analytics. By integrating education with real-world service, MauiWES helps Hawai'i grow its own workforce while instilling a model of ethical, community-engaged scholarship.

As the MauiWes program involves significant participation by its non-profit partners, delivery depends on community-based non-profit entities for trusted outreach, translation and participation navigation. Thus, timely funding to them is essential. When state funds are appropriated solely to the University, and then must be routed to non-profit partners through State procurement and contracting practices, the resulting requirements can create delays and administrative burden that disrupt time-sensitive community events, screenings and follow-up services. The University, therefore, strongly prefers that key non-profit partners receive their own direct appropriation (e.g., grant-in-aid), or that SB 2969 SD1 explicitly authorize sub-awards or grants to designated non-profit partners without triggering full procurement timelines.

Due to the work of MauiWES, hundreds of participants have followed up with healthcare providers, accessed mental health services, and made meaningful lifestyle changes as a direct result of their participation. SB 2969 SD1 ensures that this commitment continues, that services remain available to those who need them most, and that Hawai'i remains a national leader in community-centered, disaster-informed health response.

Thank you for your consideration.

Council Chair  
Alice L. Lee

Vice-Chair  
Yuki Lei K. Sugimura

Councilmembers  
K. Kauano'e Batangan  
Tom Cook  
Gabe Johnson  
Tamara Paltin  
Keani N.W. Rawlins-Fernandez  
Shane M. Sinenci  
Nohelani U'u-Hodgins



Director of Council Services  
David M. Raatz, Jr., Esq.

Deputy Director of Council Services  
Richelle K. Kawasaki, Esq.

**COUNTY COUNCIL**  
COUNTY OF MAUI  
200 S. HIGH STREET  
WAILUKU, MAUI, HAWAII 96793  
[www.MauiCounty.us](http://www.MauiCounty.us)

March 12, 2026

TO: The Honorable Andrew Takuya Garrett, Chair  
House Committee on Higher Education (HED)

FROM: Alice L. Lee  
Council Chair

SUBJECT: **HEARING OF MARCH 16, 2026; TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 2969, SD1, RELATING TO THE MAUI WILDFIRE EXPOSURE STUDY AND MAUI HEALTH REGISTRY**

I support this measure appropriating funds for the University of Hawai'i to expand and sustain services provided by the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry.

The Maui County Council has not had the opportunity to take a formal position on this measure. Therefore, I am providing this testimony in my capacity as an individual member of the Maui County Council.

I support this measure for the following reasons:

1. The impacts of the Maui wildfires did not end in August 2023. Many residents, particularly children and the medically vulnerable, continue to experience ongoing physical and mental health challenges.
2. Appropriating funds for Maui WES and the Maui Health Registry ensures that trusted community-based care and early detection support continues which may be otherwise inaccessible to many families.
3. Maui WES, the largest post-disaster health effort in Hawai'i's history, also serves as a cost-effective and community-driven model for care that can be expanded to strengthen the resilience of our community.

Thank you for your consideration.

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Council Chair  
Alice L. Lee

Vice-Chair  
Yuki Lei K. Sugimura

Councilmembers  
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March 13, 2026

TO: Honorable Andrew Takuya Garrett, Chair, and  
Members of the House Committee on Higher Education

FROM: Nohelani U'u-Hodgins *Nohelani U'u-Hodgins*  
Councilmember

DATE: Monday, March 16, 2026  
2:00 p.m., Conference Room 309

SUBJECT: **TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 2969, SD1, RELATING TO THE MAUI  
WILDFIRE EXPOSURE STUDY AND MAUI HEALTH REGISTRY**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of this important measure. The purpose of this measure is to appropriate funds for the University of Hawai'i to expand and sustain services provided by the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry.

The Maui County Council has not had the opportunity to take a formal position on this measure. Therefore, I am providing this testimony in my capacity as an individual member of the Maui County Council.

The 2023 Maui wildfires caused unprecedented devastation, and many survivors continue to experience potential long-term health impacts from toxic exposure, respiratory illness, and trauma. The Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) and Maui Health Registry have provided critical health screenings, biomonitoring, and referrals for more than two thousand residents, helping identify risks early and connect individuals with needed care.

By investing in this program, the State can ensure continued monitoring and support for wildfire survivors, particularly children, first responders, kūpuna, and other medically vulnerable residents. Expanding these services will strengthen community resilience, improve long-term health outcomes, and help prevent more serious and costly health complications in the future.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge your support of SB 2969, SD1.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit testimony in support of this measure.



## Hawaii Medical Association

1360 South Beretania Street, Suite 200 • Honolulu, Hawaii 96814  
Phone: 808.536.7702 • Fax: 808.528.2376 • hawaiimedicalassociation.org

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION  
Representative Andrew Takuya Garrett, Chair  
Representative Terez Amato, Vice Chair

Date: March 16, 2026  
From: Hawaii Medical Association (HMA)  
Elizabeth Ann Ignacio MD - Chair, HMA Public Policy Committee  
Christina Marzo MD and Robert Carlisle MD, Vice Chairs, HMA Public Policy Committee

**RE SB 2969 SD 1** RELATING TO THE MAUI WILDFIRE EXPOSURE STUDY AND MAUI HEALTH REGISTRY. University of Hawai'i; Maui Wildfire Exposure Study; Maui Health Registry; Appropriation  
**Position: Support**

This measure would appropriate funds for the University of Hawai'i to expand and sustain services provided by the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (WES) and Maui Health Registry.

The Maui WES cohort study of adults affected by the Maui wildfires found significant mid-term cardiopulmonary and psychological health impacts, with social support linked to better mental health but not to improvements in physiological outcomes such as reduced lung function. These findings underscore the need for disaster response models that combine long-term clinical surveillance, targeted mental health interventions, and culturally grounded community support to protect vulnerable populations as climate-driven disasters increase.

Maui WES has combined biomonitoring, health screenings, biospecimens, and socioeconomic data to track health outcomes among affected residents and has grown to include over 2,000 participants. It represents the most comprehensive post-disaster health study in Hawai'i's history.

The health outcomes from wildfires extend beyond acute injury, affecting physical, mental, social, and economic well-being. HMA supports funding of this comprehensive research and registries. Maui WES equips policymakers, clinicians, and community partners with the evidence necessary to protect health, reduce preventable disease burdens, and prioritize vulnerable populations of Hawaii after disasters.

Thank you for allowing the Hawaii Medical Association to testify in support of this measure.

### 2026 Hawaii Medical Association Public Policy Coordination Team

Elizabeth A Ignacio, MD, Chair • Robert Carlisle, MD, Vice Chair • Christina Marzo, MD, Vice Chair  
Linda Rosehill, JD, Government Relations • Marc Alexander, Executive Director

### 2026 Hawaii Medical Association Officers

Nadine Tenn-Salle, MD, President • Jerald Garcia, MD, President Elect • Elizabeth Ann Ignacio, MD, • Immediate Past President  
Laeton Pang, MD, Treasurer • Thomas Kosasa, MD, Secretary • Marc Alexander, Executive Director

## REFERENCES

Juarez R, Phankitnirundorn K, Ozorio Dutra SV, Bond-Smith D, Lee AG, Maunakea AK. Health and Social Support in the Aftermath of the Maui Wildfires. *JAMA Netw Open*. 2025 Aug 1;8(8):e2525430. doi: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2025.25430. PMID: 40768146; PMCID: PMC12329611.

Maunakea, Alike, et al. "Invisible Battles: Maui Survivors Struggle With Mental Health Two Years Post-Fire." *Hawaii Public Radio*, 5 Aug. 2025.

Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES). *From Crisis to Recovery: Health and Resilience Two Years After the Maui Wildfires*. University of Hawai'i, June 2025, [www.mauiwes.info](http://www.mauiwes.info).

### **2024 Hawaii Medical Association Officers**

Elizabeth Ann Ignacio, MD, President • Nadine Tenn-Salle, MD, President Elect • Angela Pratt, MD, Immediate Past President  
Jerris Hedges, MD, Treasurer • Thomas Kosasa, MD, Secretary • Marc Alexander, Executive Director

### **2024 Hawaii Medical Association Public Policy Coordination Team**

Beth England, MD, Chair  
Linda Rosehill, JD, Government Relations • Marc Alexander, Executive Director



Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Hawai'i

March 11, 2026

**Letter of Support for SB2969  
Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry**

Aloha Chair and Members of the Higher Education Committee,

On behalf of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Hawai'i, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the economic well-being of Hispanic-owned businesses and the broader Hawai'i workforce, we write in **strong support of SB2969**, which would provide critical funding to sustain and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry (MauiWES).

The Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Hawai'i has been an early partner of MauiWES and has worked closely with the study team since its inception. From the beginning, we have been deeply impressed by the study's commitment to meaningful community engagement, particularly among populations that are often underserved and underrepresented in health systems and research.

Hispanics represent approximately **11% of Hawai'i's population**, yet nearly **18% of participants in MauiWES** identify as Hispanic. This level of engagement reflects intentional outreach, culturally responsive communication, and genuine trust built between MauiWES and the community. For many Hispanic residents, this was the first time they received comprehensive health education, screening, and navigation support following the wildfires.

Several Hispanic-owned businesses and employers were directly impacted by the 2023 Maui wildfires. Many of their employees faced compounded challenges, including displacement, health concerns, language barriers, and limited access to care. We witnessed firsthand how MauiWES supported employees of these businesses by providing education, clinical screening, and referrals to services that are severely lacking in Maui, particularly for immigrant and working families.

From an economic and workforce perspective, this work is essential. A **healthy population translates directly into healthier workers, stronger businesses, and a more resilient local economy**. When employees have access to preventive care, mental health support, and trusted health information, businesses experience reduced absenteeism, improved productivity, and greater stability during recovery.

**SB2969** will allow this critical effort to continue and expand, ensuring that up to 3,000 residents—especially those most affected by the wildfires—can receive sustained health

**Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Hawai'i**

[www.hcchawaii.org](http://www.hcchawaii.org)



support. It also signals that Hawai'i recognizes long-term health recovery as a cornerstone of economic resilience and workforce stability.

For these reasons, the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Hawai'i strongly urges your support of **SB2969**. This investment strengthens individual and family health while supporting Hawai'i's businesses and workforce.

Mahalo for your consideration and for your continued commitment to the people and businesses of Maui and the State of Hawai'i.

Respectfully,

Barbara de Lucca  
Co-founder & President  
Hispanic Chamber of Commerce Hawai'i

## COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Rep. Andrew Takuya Garrett, Chair

Rep. Terez Amato, Vice Chair

Friday, March 13, 2026, 2:00p.m., Conference Room 309

### TESTIMONY IN STRONG SUPPORT OF SB 2969 SD 1 – MAKING AN APPROPRIATION FOR THE MAUI WILDFIRE EXPOSURE STUDY AND THE MAUI HEALTH REGISTRY

My name is Pedro Haro, and I am the Executive Director of the American Lung Association in Hawai'i. On behalf of our organization and the thousands of Hawai'i residents we serve, I am writing in strong support of SB 2969, which provides vital supplemental funding to sustain and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) and the Maui Health Registry.

The American Lung Association's mission is to save lives by improving lung health and preventing lung disease. In the aftermath of the August 2023 wildfires, our concern for the long-term respiratory health of the Maui community remains a top priority. The urban fire in Lāhainā was an unprecedented environmental event, releasing a complex mixture of heavy metals, synthetic chemicals, and toxic particulates. The respiratory risks associated with these exposures do not vanish when the smoke clears; they often evolve into chronic conditions over decades.

The Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry are essential to protecting the community for the following reasons:

1. **Tracking Chronic Respiratory Illness and Latency:** Early data has already highlighted the immediate respiratory distress felt by survivors. However, environmental exposures from urban fires—which include lead, arsenic, and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs)—are known to have significant latency periods before manifesting as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD), pulmonary fibrosis, or lung cancer [1]. This registry provides the longitudinal tracking necessary to identify these trends early.
2. **Protecting Medically Vulnerable Populations:** Children, the elderly, and those with pre-existing lung conditions are at the highest risk from the lingering toxic legacy of the fires. Research into wildfire smoke and ash exposure consistently shows that vulnerable groups experience higher rates of emergency department visits for respiratory issues long after the initial event [2]. By expanding this study to 3,000 individuals, we ensure that a representative portion of these high-risk groups is monitored.
3. **Addressing Funding Gaps and Data Continuity:** As federal resources become more uncertain, it is imperative that the State of Hawai'i steps in to ensure this work is not interrupted. Gaps in longitudinal

data collection significantly undermine the ability of public health officials to establish causal links between disaster exposure and health outcomes [3]. We cannot afford to lose the momentum or the trust that the MauiWES team has built with over 2,000 participants to date.

4. Informed Public Health Policy and Future Preparedness: The findings from this registry will inform future public health responses, helping the American Lung Association and our state partners develop better air quality protections and clinical guidelines for future wildfire events in Hawai'i and beyond [4].

We owe it to the people of Maui to ensure they are not forgotten as the years pass. This registry is more than a study; it is a critical health safety net. On behalf of the American Lung Association in Hawai'i, I respectfully urge your committees to support SB 2969, SD1.

Mahalo for your time and for your commitment to the lung health of our community.

Sincerely,

Pedro Haro  
Executive Director  
American Lung Association in Hawai'i

[Pedro.Haro@lung.org](mailto:Pedro.Haro@lung.org)

Citations:

1. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2022). "The Chemistry of Fires at the Wildland-Urban Interface."
2. Rice, M. B., et al. (2021). "Respiratory Impacts of Wildland Fire Smoke: Future Challenges and Policy Opportunities." Annals of the American Thoracic Society.
3. Lurie, N., et al. (2013). "Research as a Part of Public Health Emergency Response." New England Journal of Medicine.  
Cascio, W. E. (2018). "Wildland fire smoke and human health." Science of The Total Environment



COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Rep. Andrew Takuya Garrett, Chair

Rep. Terez Amato, Vice Chair

HEARING: Monday, March 16, 2026 at 2:00 pm, Via Videoconference and Conference Room 309

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 2969, SD1 - RELATING TO THE MAUI WILDFIRE EXPOSURE STUDY AND MAUI HEALTH REGISTRY.

Aloha Chair Garrett, Vice Chair Amato, Rep. Woodson of Maui, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Veronica Mendoza, Founding Executive Director of Roots Reborn and a founding coalition member of El Pueblo en Acción (EPA) Maui - *The People in Action Maui*. Roots Reborn **strongly supports SB 2969, SD1**, relating to the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) and Maui Health Registry, which appropriates funds for the University of Hawai'i to expand and sustain services provided by the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry.

Roots Reborn is a grassroots, immigrant-justice and disaster-response organization serving migrant and immigrant communities on Maui and across the state. Formed after the August 2023 wildfires, our team has worked alongside families through every phase of recovery by providing aid, navigating systems, and building community trust that remains the foundation of our work today.

More than two years after the August 2023 wildfires, the health impacts on our community are still unfolding. Many of the families we serve did not experience symptoms right away. We are now seeing breathing problems, acute mental health struggles, and concerns related to toxic exposure – often without insurance, stable housing, or access to care.

As a Community Partner of MauiWES, we have seen firsthand how transformative this work has been. Community members who had never received a comprehensive physical/screening were finally able to understand what was happening to their bodies, receive referrals, and feel seen and supported. This has been especially critical for immigrant families who are often afraid or unable to seek care elsewhere.

Senate Bill 2969, SD1 would allow this work to continue by supporting the screening and follow-up care of up to 3,000 additional residents, with a focus on children, first responders, and kūpuna – those most exposed and most vulnerable. To date, more than 2,000 residents have already been screened, and the results are alarming. Many are showing signs of respiratory illness, toxic exposure, and serious mental health challenges. Among children screened, more than half showed signs of depression, and many adults continue to struggle with anxiety and PTSD. This effort is not just about research. It is about early detection, connection to care, and making sure families do not fall through the cracks, especially those who already face barriers due to language, immigration status, or lack of insurance.

Lahaina continues to carry the burden of the deadliest wildfire in the United States in over a century. Senate Bill 2969 is a compassionate and practical step to ensure that recovery includes long-term health support — not just rebuilding homes and roads. **We respectfully urge you to pass SB2969, SD1.** We would welcome the opportunity to speak further or answer any questions. Mahalo for your time and for your continued commitment to Maui's communities.

Sinceramente,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Veronica Mendoza', written in a cursive style.

Veronica Mendoza

Maui Roots Reborn, *Founding Executive Director*

El Pueblo en Accion Maui, *Founding Coalition Member*



## Hawai'i Community Health

[info@hawaiicommunityhealth.org](mailto:info@hawaiicommunityhealth.org) | [www.hawaiicommunityhealth.org](http://www.hawaiicommunityhealth.org)

March 10, 2026

To: House Higher Education Committee

Re: **Strong Support for SB 2969 – Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry**

**Aloha Chair Takuya Garrett, Vice Chair Amato, and Members of the Committee,**

On behalf of myself and **Hawai'i Community Health**, I write in **strong support of SB 2969**, which would provide critical funding to expand the **Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) and Maui Health Registry** and to support community partners delivering vital interventions, follow-up engagement, education, and coordinated care for fire-impacted residents.

My name is Dayna Moore. I am a **Kānaka Maoli nurse rooted in Maui and a community organization leader with both clinical and systems-level experience**. I have been directly involved in Maui's wildfire crisis response and recovery since **August 8, 2023**, the deadliest urban wildfire disaster in a century. Building on prior public health and pandemic work, I continue to volunteer regularly at clinics with **MauiWES + Registry**, while coordinating statewide and community-based efforts through Hawai'i Community Health to support residents, providers, and partners.

From this direct involvement, the health impacts of the Maui wildfires did not end in 2023. Many **adverse physical and mental health conditions are emerging over time**, particularly among keiki, kūpuna, first responders, volunteers, debris cleanup and rebuild crews, educators, and others exposed directly or indirectly in and around burn zones. Displacement, loss of access, and survival priorities delayed care for many residents, and **limited rural health system capacity continues to compound these challenges**.

The **Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry** are now **trusted, community-based entry points** for screening, referral, and **early intervention**. These programs identify health concerns **before they escalate into emergencies**, support continuity of care, and reach individuals who might otherwise face barriers to access. **SB 2969 is essential not only to expand MauiWES and the Registry, but also to fund community partners providing interventions, follow-up, education, and coordinated care**.

### **How Hawai'i Community Health supports MauiWES and fire-impacted communities**

- On-the-ground clinic support alongside research and clinical teams
- Community and provider network-building
- Distribution of PPE, medical and oral health supplies, clothing, and essentials
- Education and training for providers and the community, including continuing education
- Pro bono health-related services and support
- Referral pathways and trusted resource coordination
- Multidisciplinary partnerships and statewide information-sharing
- Outreach through media, digital platforms, and in-person engagement
- Continuity across acute response, recovery, and long-term health monitoring



*Much of our work referenced, and more, occurs through **individual volunteer efforts and without access to sustainable funding**. A band-aid on a gaping wound- this valuable work reflects only a portion of what is possible. As an ongoing volunteer and coordinator in crisis recovery since 2020, I can attest that it is now rare to find committed volunteer help on Maui as many are living amongst affected communities and needing to mālama their 'ohana and focus on self-care. With stable resources and strong partnerships: new paths, early interventions, and our prevention models can be expanded and sustained to better protect community health while also supporting Maui's long-term economic recovery and growth.*

**Every point of contact with our community has mattered.**

I have seen the impact - shared in the tears and smiles - firsthand over years. This work has always been a collective effort and HCH extends a big mahalo to the MauiWES Team (*led by Directors Drs. Alike Maunakea and Ruben Juarez*) and partners for such tireless and incredible work.

**SB 2969 represents a necessary investment** in evidence-based, cultural and community-centered care that honors the lived realities of Maui residents and strengthens Hawai'i's capacity to respond to disaster-related health impacts now and in the future. Together, we are making Hawai'i a leader that the world looks to for groundbreaking models of culturally based comprehensive long-term disaster-recovery that prioritizes public health and improving access to care.

For these reasons, **Hawai'i Community Health strongly urges your support of SB 2969.**

Mahalo for your leadership and continued commitment to the health and well-being of our communities. Please reach out anytime if I can be of further assistance.

With respect and aloha,

Dayna Moore, BSN, LPN

**on behalf of: Hawai'i Community Health (HCH) and Hawai'i Health C.A.R.E. Hui (HHCH)**

Founder | Operations Manager - HCH

Founder | Director - HHCH

HCH Website: [www.hawaiicommunityhealth.org](http://www.hawaiicommunityhealth.org)

Email: [dayna@hawaiicommunityhealth.org](mailto:dayna@hawaiicommunityhealth.org)





March 14, 2026

To: COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION  
Rep. Andrew Takuya Garrett, Chair  
Rep. Terez Amato, Vice Chair

Re: SUPPORT of SB2969 SD1 RELATING TO MAUI WILDFIRE EXPOSURE STUDY  
AND MAUI HEALTH REGISTRY

Hrg: March 16, 2026 at 2:00 PM

The Hawai'i Public Health Association (HPHA) is a group of over 450 community members, public health professionals, and organizations statewide dedicated to improving public health. Our mission is to promote public health in Hawai'i through leadership, collaboration, education and advocacy.

The Hawaii Public Health Association supports SB2969 SD1 and its goal to provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

The impacts of the wildfires did not end in August 2023. Many residents continue to experience ongoing health concerns, including respiratory problems, mental health challenges, and uncertainty about long-term effects, especially for children and other medically vulnerable individuals.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry provide trusted, community-based care, early detection, and referrals that would otherwise be inaccessible to many families. Continued funding will help ensure that people are not forgotten and that health issues are identified before they become emergencies.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to support SB 2969 SD1 and ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on this important public health issue.

Respectfully submitted,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Holly Kessler". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Holly Kessler  
Executive Director

Testimony of  
Jonathan Ching  
Head of Government Relations

Before:  
House Committee on Higher Education  
The Honorable Andrew Takuya Garrett, Chair  
The Honorable Terez Amato, Vice Chair

Monday, March 16, 2026  
2:00 p.m.  
Via Videoconference  
Conference Room 309

**Re: SB 2969, SD1 Relating to Making an Emergency Appropriation to the University of Hawaii.**

Chair Garrett, Vice Chair Amato, and committee members, thank you for this opportunity to provide testimony on SB 2969, SD1, which would provide critical funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) and the Maui Health Registry.

**Kaiser Permanente Hawai'i SUPPORTS SB 2969, SD1.**

Kaiser Permanente Hawai'i is one of the nation's largest not-for-profit health plans, serving 12.6 million members nationwide, and more than 271,000 members in Hawai'i. In Hawai'i, more than 4,200 dedicated employees and more than 650 Hawai'i Permanente Medical Group physicians and advance practice providers work in our integrated health system to provide our members coordinated care and coverage. Kaiser Permanente Hawai'i has more than 20+ medical facilities, including our award-winning Moanalua Medical Center. We continue to provide high-quality coordinated care for our members and deliver on our commitment to improve the health of our members and the people living in the communities we serve.

Kaiser Permanente has invested significantly in this work because we have seen firsthand the long-term health needs emerging after the Maui wildfires. To date, Kaiser Permanente has invested \$587,500 in project support for MauiWES to help ensure survivors receive immediate screening, referrals, and long-term follow-up care.

Kaiser Permanente has been encouraged by strong engagement in MauiWES: more than 2,000 Maui residents have already participated, with 41% following up with healthcare providers after initial study screenings and 16% accessing mental health services for the first time. This demonstrates how essential MauiWES is for connecting survivors to care, especially those who are under-insured or historically underserved.

SB 2969, SD1 would ensure continuity of these services, including:

- Free health screenings, toxic exposure testing, and care coordination for survivors
- Expansion of pediatric services, including mental health and exposure testing for 300 children annually
- Enrollment of 2,000 residents per year into the Maui Health Registry for long-term monitoring
- Community forums, data sharing, and culturally grounded engagement reaching 1,000+ residents annually

Importantly, this study does more than document harm; it actively reduces health inequities, strengthens trust in healthcare, and supports resilience in communities disproportionately impacted, including immigrant families and Native Hawaiian residents.

Kaiser Permanente is committed to continuing our collaboration with UHERO, the University of Hawai'i Foundation, the John A. Burns School of Medicine, and Maui's community partners, but philanthropic and private support cannot sustain this critical public health infrastructure alone. State funding is essential to ensure that:

- Survivors receive ongoing monitoring and follow-up care,
- Children receive early detection for emerging health conditions, and
- Maui has the data needed to shape evidence-based recovery and future disaster response.

We request your support of SB 2969, SD1 to ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and long-term protection they deserve.

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

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/12/2026 3:06:57 PM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Annie Alvelais	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair and members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is Annie Alvelais, and I am a Maui resident. I am writing in strong support of SB2969, which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

MauiWES has continued to show up for our community, years after the fires. I've heard from several participants of the study that the care and attention they receive from their checkins surpasses what they have from their PCP.

The impacts of the wildfires did not end in August 2023. Many residents continue to experience ongoing health concerns, including respiratory problems, mental health challenges, and uncertainty about long-term effects, especially for children and other medically vulnerable individuals.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry provide trusted, community-based care, early detection, and referrals that would otherwise be inaccessible to many families. Continued funding will help ensure that people are not forgotten and that health issues are identified before they become emergencies.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to support SB2969 and ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve.

Mahalo for your time, consideration, and commitment to the health of our communities.

With aloha,  
Annie Alvelais

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/12/2026 3:33:34 PM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Evelyn Del Valle	Roots Reborn	Support	In Person

Comments:

Aloha Chair and Members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is Evelyn Del Valle, and I am a community member who grew up on Maui and now works closely with immigrant and mixed-status families through Roots Reborn. I am writing in strong support of SB 2969, which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

Growing up on Maui, I saw many of the adults around me struggle to access health care. People worked hard, supported their families, and were deeply connected to our community, yet seeing a doctor was often delayed or avoided because of cost, language barriers, lack of insurance, or fear related to immigration status. Those experiences shaped the work I do today. Through my role at Roots Reborn, I continue to see these same barriers affecting families who were already vulnerable before the fires and are now facing even greater health concerns.

The impacts of the wildfires did not end in August 2023. Many residents continue to experience ongoing health concerns, including respiratory problems, mental health challenges, and uncertainty about long-term effects, especially for children, kūpuna, and other medically vulnerable individuals. For many families we serve, symptoms did not appear immediately, and they are only now beginning to understand the toll the disaster has taken on their health.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry provide trusted, community-based care, early detection, and referrals that would otherwise be inaccessible to many families. These programs have helped residents receive screenings, understand their health, and connect with care in ways that feel safe and accessible. Continued funding will help ensure that people are not forgotten and that health issues are identified early, before they become emergencies.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to support SB 2969 and ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve as recovery continues.

Mahalo for your time, consideration, and commitment to the health of our communities.

Sincerely,  
Evelyn Del Valle

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/12/2026 3:54:01 PM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Martha Hufft	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair and members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is Martha Hufft, and I am a resident, community member and employee of the State of Hawaii. I am writing in **strong support of SB 2969**, which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

I work for the Department of Health on Maui and worked to support my DOH team and community in working during, and after the devastating wildfires on Maui. The life-changing effects of this disaster on individuals, families and community health need to be identified, tracked and monitored so that as a State we can not only connect these individuals to necessary resources, but also identify impacts of future wildfires, provide information to the public for preventative health steps and plan for community support.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry provide trusted, community-based care, early detection, and referrals that would otherwise be inaccessible to many families. Continued funding will help ensure that people are not forgotten and that health issues are identified before they become emergencies.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to **support SB2969** and ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve.

Mahalo for your time, consideration, and commitment to the health of our communities.

Sincerely,  
Martha Hufft

Mahalo nui loa,

**Testimony of Dr. Ruben Juarez  
In Strong Support of SB2969 SD1 – Funding for the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study  
(MauiWES) and Maui Health Registry**

Aloha Chairs and Members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is **Dr. Ruben Juarez**, and I am one of the co-directors of the **Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry** ([MauiWES.org](http://MauiWES.org)). I submit this testimony in strong support of **SB2969 SD1**, which would provide critical funding to sustain and expand this work to up to 3000 Maui residents.

MauiWES has been transformative for the Maui community, not only as a research study, but as a trusted, community-centered health response during one of the most difficult periods in Maui's history. This effort exists because the community asked for it, and because the community continues to rely on it.

Since the 2023 Maui wildfires, our team has reached **more than 2,000 individuals affected by the fires**, and nearly **1,200 participants have returned for follow-up in the second year**. Many of these residents had not prioritized their health since the fires, not due to neglect, but because survival came first: housing instability, job loss, food insecurity, and trauma. Health was often postponed. *MauiWES helped bring it back to the forefront.*

Dr. Alika Maunakea and I personally attend MauiWES community events *at least once a month*. We do not manage this work from afar, we show up, listen, and engage directly with participants. What we have seen is powerful. While some health indicators are slowly improving, the most meaningful change has been the *restoration of agency*: people feeling empowered to understand their health, ask questions, and take action.

The impact is measurable:

- **825 participants** followed up with a healthcare provider after receiving their results
- **760 individuals** made lifestyle changes based on their health findings
- **320 people** accessed mental health services they otherwise would not have sought

We have also referred *dozens of individuals to the emergency room* based on screening results, providing, in some cases, *life-saving interventions*. These are not abstract statistics. These are parents, kūpuna, immigrant families, and wildfire survivors, many of whom were connected to care for the *first time* because MauiWES met them where they were, in their language, and through trusted community partners.

Equally important, MauiWES has helped *rebuild trust* in health and research systems that many communities had disengaged from. By returning results on the same day, explaining findings clearly, and directly linking participants to services, rather than handing them a pamphlet, we demonstrated that research can *serve communities, not extract from them*.

While there are substantial economic savings associated with this work, which I will abstain from detailing in this testimony, I want to emphasize that MauiWES has been one of the most impactful community-based research initiatives undertaken by the University of Hawai‘i to date. It represents the ideal integration of education, research, and direct community service, and it clearly demonstrates the tangible impact that the University of Hawai‘i can, and does, have when it is deeply engaged with the communities it serves.

Beyond Maui, the lessons from MauiWES are now helping to *build a disaster health resilience model* that can be applied elsewhere. Just recently, our team returned from supporting communities affected by the *Los Angeles fires*, where we shared lessons learned from Maui, particularly around rapid health screening, community trust, and culturally grounded engagement. Maui is not only healing; it is *leading*, and helping other communities respond more effectively to disaster-related health impacts.

As we enter Year 3, we are ready to take on an *unprecedented next phase*. With increased support, our goals are to:

- *Enroll up to 3,000 participants, continuing being the largest social and biomedical screening study ever conducted after a disaster in Hawai‘i*
- *Expand significantly to children*, where participation to date has been limited to approximately 200 youth, despite clear evidence that children are among the most vulnerable to long-term impacts
- *Build a comparison cohort from other parts of Maui*, which is essential to distinguish wildfire-related health effects from broader island-wide trends
- *Strengthen local health capacity* and train the next generation of community-based researchers, healthcare workers, and translators to carry this work forward

This is not just about data, it is about *building lasting infrastructure*, ensuring continuity of care, and creating a model that Hawai‘i can rely on for future disasters.

Let me be very clear: *MauiWES is not a short-term project*. The health consequences of the fires will unfold over years, and so must the response. Our commitment to this community is *day by day*, standing alongside the people most affected, long after the headlines fade.

Continued support through **SB2969 SD1** will allow us to remain present, responsive, and accountable, while building a sustainable, community-driven health system that Maui deserves.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify and for your continued commitment to the people of Maui.

Respectfully,

**Dr. Ruben Juarez**

UHERO–HMSA Distinguished Professor in Health Economics

Department of Economics & UHERO

University of Hawai‘i

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/12/2026 9:38:08 PM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Princess Cacpal	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair and members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is Princess Cacpal, and I am a community member. I am writing in **strong support of SB2969**, which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) and the Maui Health Registry.

I have been volunteering with MauiWES for a year now and I have witnessed the impact it has made on the wildfire survivors. Initiatives like these make the people of this community feel seen and cared for. It is imperative for them to know that there are people out there willing to fight and care for them. Although the fires are over, their battles continue and we cannot not let them fight alone.

The impacts of the wildfires did not end in August 2023. Many residents continue to experience ongoing health concerns, including respiratory problems, mental health challenges, and uncertainty about long-term effects, especially for children and other medically vulnerable individuals.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry provide trusted, community-based care, early detection, and referrals that would otherwise be inaccessible to many families. Continued funding will help ensure that people are not forgotten and that health issues are identified before they become emergencies.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to **support SB2969** and ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve.

Mahalo for your time, consideration, and commitment to the health of our communities.

Sincerely,

Princess Cacpal

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/12/2026 9:38:08 PM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Princess Cacpal	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair and members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is Princess Cacpal, and I am a community member. I am writing in **strong support of SB2969**, which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) and the Maui Health Registry.

I have been volunteering with MauiWES for a year now and I have witnessed the impact it has made on the wildfire survivors. Initiatives like these make the people of this community feel seen and cared for. It is imperative for them to know that there are people out there willing to fight and care for them. Although the fires are over, their battles continue and we cannot not let them fight alone.

The impacts of the wildfires did not end in August 2023. Many residents continue to experience ongoing health concerns, including respiratory problems, mental health challenges, and uncertainty about long-term effects, especially for children and other medically vulnerable individuals.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry provide trusted, community-based care, early detection, and referrals that would otherwise be inaccessible to many families. Continued funding will help ensure that people are not forgotten and that health issues are identified before they become emergencies.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to **support SB2969** and ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve.

Mahalo for your time, consideration, and commitment to the health of our communities.

Sincerely,

Princess Cacpal

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/12/2026 9:53:47 PM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Peggy Latare	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

My name is Dr. Peggy Latare, and I am a resident of Kailua, a retired family medicine physician, and an adjunct clinical professor at the John A Burns School of Medicine. I am in strong support of SB 2969, which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

For the past year and a half, I have been volunteering with the Maui study at the screening clinics there. I have seen for myself, and as a physician of over 40 years, just how devastating the wildfires have been on Maui residents' mental, physical, and spiritual health. Just a few weeks ago we sent two adults to urgent care for extremely high blood pressure readings, a medical emergency. We are also detecting untreated as well as undiagnosed diabetes, lung disease, mental health concerns, and as I mentioned, high blood pressure.

The impacts of the wildfires did not end in August 2023. One of the things that has impressed me the most about working with the MauiWES study group is their ability to flex to the needs of the community. In the early days with so much job and insurance loss people had no contact with their usual medical care and the study helped them find temporary access to care- these events especially affect children and other medically vulnerable individuals.

Continued funding for these programs will help ensure that people are not forgotten and that health issues are identified before they become emergencies.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to support SB 2969 and ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve.

Mahalo for your time and consideration,

Peggy Latare, MD

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/13/2026 8:27:29 AM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Susan Pcola_Davis	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

**Strongly Support**

Most importantly we (State of Hawai'i) are a first of a kind to address physical and mental health of survivors of the wildfire. First and foremost were the people of Lahaina. Secondly, we are a model!

This legislature recognizes that this is the only access to data, as well as healthcare, that Hawai'i has to measure the health effects of the 2023 Lahaina wildfire. Maui WES has continued to provide comprehensive reports with up-to-date information. I re-emphasize, it is the first and only, providing immediate and continuing health both physical and mental, like it in the country! Maybe before your final decision, you could read this report. Funding is absolutely required to continue. This is longitudinal and will follow participants through their lives.

Money is tight but this is important to add more participants, especially children. It has proved invaluable in recognizing PTSD. These mental health services as well as other services are managing to help those through this terrible point-in-time in their lives, all at no cost for the registered survivors. "From Crisis to Recovery: Health and Resilience Two Years After the Mami Wildfires"; June 2025.

This year's report reveals the lasting health and social impacts of the 2023 Maui wildfires. Key findings include sharp increases in depression, chronic illness risk, and barriers to care especially among uninsured and displaced residents.

Kudos to Alika and Rueben for your continued service! As a team initiative, thank you team.

IT'S NOT JUST RESEARCH, IT IS SAVING LIVES.

<p>&nbsp;</p>

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/13/2026 8:32:31 AM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Manmohan Yadav	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair and members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is Manmohan Yadav, and I am a community member. I am writing in strong support of SB2969, which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

The impacts of the Maui wildfires did not end in August 2023. Many residents continue to face ongoing health concerns, including respiratory problems, mental health challenges, and uncertainty about long-term effects, especially for children and other medically vulnerable individuals.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry provide trusted, community-based care, early detection, and referrals that might otherwise be inaccessible to many families. Continued funding will help ensure that affected residents are not forgotten and that health issues are identified before they become more serious.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to support SB2969 and help ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve.

Mahalo for your time, consideration, and commitment to the health of our communities.

Sincerely,

Manmohan Yadav

**Aloha Chair and members of the Higher Education Committee,**

My name is Alika K. Maunakea, and I am a resident of Hawai‘i. I am submitting this testimony in my personal capacity as a community member and scientist, and not on behalf of the University of Hawai‘i or any of its entities.

I am writing to express my **strong support for SB2969, Relating to the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry.**

The 2023 Maui wildfires were not only the deadliest natural disaster in Hawai‘i’s history, but a profound public health event whose consequences are still unfolding. While the immediate devastation was visible, the longer-term health impacts — respiratory disease, mental health trauma, toxic exposures, and disruption of housing and livelihoods — are far less visible, yet no less devastating.

As someone who has been **directly involved in the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES)** since its inception, I have seen firsthand how essential this work has been for the people of Maui. The Study and the Maui Health Registry together represent the **only comprehensive, longitudinal effort** to understand how this disaster is affecting residents’ health over time, particularly for children, kūpuna, first responders, and medically vulnerable individuals.

To date, **over 2,000 Maui residents** have participated in MauiWES, receiving health screenings, biomonitoring, mental health assessments, and referrals to care. Importantly, this effort has reached communities that are often excluded from traditional healthcare and research — including Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander, Filipino, immigrant, and low-income families — by building trust and delivering services directly within the community.

Findings emerging from MauiWES underscore why **continued and expanded support is urgently needed.** Published results show substantial declines in self-reported overall health, high rates of depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress symptoms, and measurable impairments in lung function months after the fires. Biomonitoring has identified elevated levels of metals commonly associated with wildfire ash and smoke exposure, particularly among residents of Lahaina and other heavily impacted areas. These health impacts are not evenly distributed: they are **strongly shaped by housing displacement, income loss, and limited access to care**, factors that place already vulnerable communities at even greater risk.

Critically, many of these effects **do not appear in hospital or emergency department data.** Without a program like MauiWES, they would remain invisible — untreated until they become far more serious and far more costly to address. Importantly, no other effort in Hawai‘i is currently collecting rigorous, high-quality, and clinically translatable data at this scale following this unprecedented disaster. MauiWES has already become a **national model** for post-wildfire health response, informing similar efforts across the country — including serving as a reference point for the health and environmental monitoring now being assembled in the aftermath of the Los Angeles wildfires last year.

SB2969 provides the resources necessary to **sustain this work**, ensure long-term follow-up, and expand services to reach up to 3,000 individuals statewide, with a focus on those at highest risk. This is not only a compassionate response; it is a fiscally responsible one. Early detection, prevention, and coordinated follow-up care reduce the long-term burden on Hawai‘i’s healthcare system and strengthen community resilience.

More broadly, SB2969 signals that Hawai‘i recognizes disaster recovery as a **long-term health commitment**, not a short-term emergency response. The Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Health Registry is already a model for how states can respond equitably to climate-driven disasters. Continued investment will ensure that Maui — and Hawai‘i — remain leaders in protecting the health of their people. Indeed, just as importantly, funding for MauiWES and the Maui Health Registry is also an investment in Hawai‘i’s workforce. This program is training the next generation of local professionals — including students in nursing, medicine, public health, social science, and environmental science — by combining their education with real-world experience delivering services and giving back to the community. In other words, MauiWES strengthens Maui today while also helping Hawai‘i “grow its own” multidisciplinary workforce for the long-term.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to **support and pass SB2969**.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for your continued commitment to the people of Maui.

Me ke aloha pumehana,



Alika K. Maunakea, PhD  
*(Submitting in a personal capacity)*  
Honolulu, HI 96826

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/13/2026 10:05:48 AM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Kyle Quan Zhang	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair and members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is Kyle, and I am a doctoral student and research assistant at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa. I am writing in strong support of SB 2969.

I have been part of the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study from its early stages—collecting data, coordinating participant sampling, and working through every step of the research process alongside our team. This experience has given me a deeply personal understanding of why this study must continue.

The truth is, the health consequences of wildfire smoke exposure are often irreversible—and they do not appear overnight. In large-scale cohort studies like ours, it can take years, sometimes a decade or more, before certain conditions fully manifest, particularly cancers and other chronic diseases linked to toxic exposure. Of course, no one hopes that any of our participants will develop these illnesses. But the scientific reality is that prolonged exposure to hazardous smoke creates risks that may only become visible long after the fires have been extinguished. That is precisely why sustained, long-term monitoring is not just valuable—it is essential.

If we look back ten years from now at the work we are doing today, I am confident we will see it as one of the most meaningful public health efforts in Hawai‘i’s history—and a study that contributes significantly to how the world understands and responds to wildfire disasters. This is the kind of research that has the potential to leave a lasting mark, not only for Maui but for communities everywhere facing similar threats.

As a researcher, I am deeply passionate about this work. Beyond the immediate health services we provide—screenings, referrals, early detection—our findings can equip policymakers with the evidence-based insights needed to develop more effective disaster preparedness and response strategies. This is science in service of people, and it deserves to continue.

I respectfully urge you to support SB 2969 and ensure that the residents of Maui receive the long-term care and attention their health demands.

Mahalo for your time and commitment to our communities.

Sincerely,  
Kyle

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/13/2026 11:28:26 AM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Pauli Amornkul	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

My name is Pauli Amornkul, MD, MPH. I am a medical epidemiologist who started volunteering with MauiWES last year. I connect with study participants in person or by phone to help them understand their test results, answer questions, and help to connect them with wrap around services as needed. I write in **strong support of SB 2969** to provide funding to sustain and expand the important work done by the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

I started volunteering with MauiWES close to 18 months after the fires. Things were still raw. Life remained chaotic and unsettled for all of the participants I spoke with. Participants repeatedly told me how grateful they were for all that MauiWES has been doing for them. Participants felt they had been forgotten by the rest of the world as FEMA was winding down despite continued housing and life instability. “The public has moved on.” There were and continue to be many tears during my consultations. Now, nearly a year later, the sentiment remains unchanged - deep gratitude for MauiWES’ continued strong presence, advocacy, service, and support.

MauiWES has been able to connect participants with health insurance, mental health services, and screen them for early detection of potential negative health outcomes. We have detected new onset diabetes, detected blood pressures in the stage 2 hypertension range, and have had to send several participants straight to urgent care or the emergency department - in time to prevent much worse health outcomes.

I am privileged and grateful to be working *with* such a team of professionals, working *for* a community in need, and working *toward* improved quality of life for those who have been traumatized and whose lives have been upended by the fires. Many health and research questions have arisen from the data collected. The persistent elevated urine heavy metal levels is deeply concerning and begs continued surveillance, prospective monitoring, and further research.

The impact of the wildfires did not end in August 2023. Many residents continue to experience ongoing health concerns, including respiratory problems, mental health challenges, and uncertainty about long-term effects, especially for children and other medically vulnerable individuals.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry provide trusted, community-based care, early detection, and referrals that would otherwise be inaccessible to

many families. Continued funding will help ensure that people are not forgotten and that health issues are identified before they become emergencies.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to **support SB 2969** and ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve.

Mahalo for your time, consideration, and commitment to the health of our communities.

Sincerely,

**Pauli N. Amornkul, MD, MPH**

COMMITTEE ON HIGHER EDUCATION  
Rep. Andrew Takuya Garrett, Chair  
Rep. Terez Amato, Vice Chair

HEARING:

Monday, March 16, 2026 at 2:00 pm  
Via Videoconference and Conference Room 309

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB 2969, SD1 - RELATING TO THE MAUI WILDFIRE EXPOSURE STUDY AND MAUI HEALTH REGISTRY.

Aloha Chair Garrett, Vice Chair Amato, Rep. Woodson of Maui, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Christine Andrews, and I am a long-term resident of Wailuku, Maui. I write to you today in **strong support of SB 2969, SD1**, which appropriates funds for the University of Hawai'i to expand and sustain services provided by the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry.

The Maui Wildfire Exposure Study, or MauiWES, engages a wide array of partners led by the University of Hawaii Economic Research Organization and the John A. Burns School of Medicine with numerous community and health organizations. The study addresses a critical gap in knowledge about the effects of environmental hazards and socioeconomic challenges on the health of those affected by the Maui wildfires. The focus lies on collecting data and biospecimens from over 1000 residents impacted by the wildfires, providing vital insights into the short- and long-term health outcomes such as chronic diseases, mental health issues, and the broader social implications.

The mission of the MauiWES extends beyond immediate analysis. It endeavors to establish a resilient health model, integrating biomarker and socioeconomic data to forecast individual-level risks and inform preventative strategies. This comprehensive approach aims not only to address the current crisis but also to create a blueprint for future disaster response, prioritizing health and well-being in the wake of natural disasters.

The 2025 MauiWES/UHERO Report, "From Crisis to Recovery: Health and Resilience Two Years After the Maui Wildfires" shares that data collected from the full cohort of 1,800 adults through January 2025 echoes the previous year's findings and reveals the long arc of recovery. Overall, 41% of adults report worse health compared to the previous year. Half show depressive symptoms, 26% report moderate-to-severe anxiety, and 4.2% have had suicidal thoughts in the past month. Meanwhile, 74% have elevated or hypertensive blood pressure, and over a quarter show reduced lung function. While insurance coverage has improved significantly, access to care remains a persistent barrier. About one in three participants report difficulty scheduling appointments or getting prescriptions, especially for chronic and respiratory conditions. The social recovery is equally uneven. About 41% of adults are still living in temporary housing, and 25% remain unemployed but actively looking for work. Despite these struggles, 61% report high levels of support from family and friends—demonstrating the continued strength of community bonds.

Children in the MauiWES study show signs of physical healing, but their emotional well-being raises serious red flags. Over half (51%) of children ages 8-18 screen positive for depression, with 22% in the severe range. About 30% report anxiety symptoms, and nearly 45% still show signs of PTSD—4.3% at severe levels. One in four report low self-esteem, and many are experiencing functional challenges at school and home. Cardiopulmonary health is also a growing concern. One in three children had elevated or high blood pressure, with Filipino youth most affected—15.4% falling into Stage 2 hypertension. Nearly 20% of children have impaired breathing capacity, especially among Asian and Filipino children. Girls show slightly more severe lung issues. These findings point to the need for sustained investment in pediatric care, trauma-informed school services, clean indoor air, and culturally tailored mental health programs. Without early intervention, these risks could become lifelong health burdens.

I strongly support the work of the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study being done with its partner organizations in support of recovery for Maui wildfire survivors. As a Maui resident, I request that you **vote in support of SB 2969, SD1**.

Mahalo,

Christine Andrews, JD  
Wailuku, Maui

Dear chair, vice chair and other members of the House Committee on Higher Education. My name is Dr. Christopher Knightsbridge. I am one of only two full-time mental health professionals working at the only behavioral healthcare clinic in Lahaina dedicated almost entirely to wildfire survivors. I also work with the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MAUIWES), and I am asking you to please support this bill **SB2969 SD1**.

When our clinic reopened, I did everything I could to make sure people understood that the suffering in Lahaina did not end when the fires stopped. I sit with it every day. I hear it in the stories of parents who still can't sleep, in kids who are anxious and withdrawn, and in families who are doing their best to hold it together while still grieving everything they lost.

I want to be clear about something important: **MAUIWES is NOT just research**. Yes, we collect data so we can understand the long-term health effects of this disaster. But we also provide direct care. Every time we hold a collection event, we screen people for medical and mental health concerns. If someone isn't connected to care, I reach out personally. Many of them end up in my caseload. Right now, that caseload is about 100 patients. I am doing everything I can, but it is not sustainable without support.

We are trying to expand services, especially for children. Our goal is to reach 5,000 participants, including 2,000 children aged 10 and older. 3 million helps us get closer to that goal. Early intervention matters. If we catch depression, PTSD, diabetes, or hypertension early, we prevent crises later. That is not only the right thing to do — it also saves the state a lot of money. A single ER visit for a suicidal crisis can cost over \$5,000. A phone call with me to receive stabilization and support costs nothing.

Hawaii deserves the same level of care as the mainland. Survivors of other national disasters have received long-term, state-backed support. The people of Lahaina deserve the same commitment. An investment of \$3 million would allow us to expand responsibly and continue this work in a sustainable way.

This is not about research funding for us. It is about making sure this beautiful community, which continues to suffer from the impacts of the deadliest wildfire disaster in modern U.S. history, is not forgotten after the headlines fade. We have dedicated our lives to helping Lahaina recover. We are simply asking for support to continue showing up for them the way they deserve.

***Please also find attached a brief fact sheet of our findings and letters of support written by The Hawaii State Council on Mental Health for our grant seeking opportunities. Their letter is NOT a letter of endorsement for any specific bill but is a generalized letter of support which highlights their support for us to seek funding to keep our important work going.***

Thank you for taking the time to listen.



**Dr. Christopher Knightsbridge, Psy.D.**  
Head of Mental Health Research Team  
University of Hawaii Wildfire Exposure Study  
(MAUIWES) \_\_\_\_\_  
[www.MauiWES.org](http://www.MauiWES.org)

# MauiWES

## Mental Health Outcomes

### ADULT MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS (n = 1,800 wildfire-affected adults)



Depressive symptoms



Moderate-severe anxiety



Suicidal thoughts in the past month  
(Pre-fire Maui baseline: 0.8%)



Low self-esteem

### CHANGES OVER TIME (ADULT FOLLOW-UP) (n = 424 with Year-1 → Year-2 data)

- Suicidal ideation decreased by nearly 50%
- Severe depression and anxiety declined
- PTSD remains widespread (~1 in 3 adults)

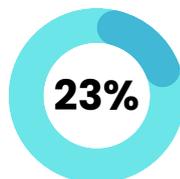
### CHILDREN MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS (Ages 8-18, n ≈ 200)



Depressive symptoms



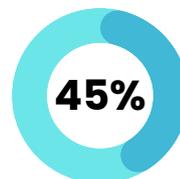
Severe depressive symptoms



Low self-esteem



Signs of anxiety disorder



PTSD symptoms

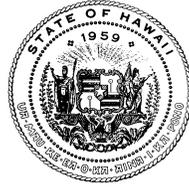
### Highest burden observed among:

Filipino, Asian, and Hispanic/Latino youth

Girls show higher depression severity, PTSD, and lower self-esteem

**RECOVERY IS UNDERWAY — BUT INCOMPLETE.**

JOSH B. GREEN, M.D.  
GOVERNOR OF HAWAII  
KE KIA'ĀINA O KA  
MOKU'ĀINA 'O HAWAI'I



KATHERINE AUMER, PhD  
COUNCIL CHAIRPERSON  
LUNA HO'OMALU O KA PAPA

**STATE OF HAWAI'I  
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH  
KA 'OIHANA OLAKINO  
STATE COUNCIL ON MENTAL HEALTH**  
P.O. Box 3378, Room 256  
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96801-3378

August 12, 2025

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To Whom It May Concern:

Two years after the devastating Maui Wildfire Disaster, we join others in remembrance and reaffirm our commitment to supporting recovery and meeting community needs.

The Council commends the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) for its rigorous, evidence-based work to understand the wildfires' health and social impacts. With accessible tools like the Maui dashboard and a service component that assesses survivors' needs and links them to mental health and related supports, MauiWES models trauma-informed best practices—ensuring survivors both contribute to research and receive timely help.

We support MauiWES' effort to seek grants and funding to continue research and services but also urge stronger coordination with the Department of Health, its Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics (CCBHCs), Qualified Public Health Clinics (QPHCs), the Department of Education, the Department of Human Services, and other partners. All have also been on the ground, helping survivors and the island community. By seeking and threading resources together, we can ensure all survivors and affected parties—not only research participants—benefit from a seamless network of care.

Recognizing the Department of Health's broad responsibilities, we see MauiWES as a complementary resource that can strengthen existing programs. Partnerships and diverse funding can amplify the collective impact of our public health and community systems.

As established in HRS 334.10, the State Council on Mental Health advises the Department of Health, Governor, and Legislature on statewide mental health care needs and resources. Our vision is a Hawai'i where

*Page 2. To Whom It May Concern Letter of Support for MauiWES*

people of all ages with mental health challenges can achieve recovery and live full lives in the community of their choice.

Thank you. For more information, please contact us through our email, [doh.scmhchairperson@doh.hawaii.gov](mailto:doh.scmhchairperson@doh.hawaii.gov).

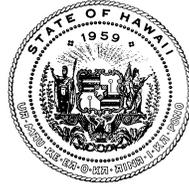
Sincerely,



Katherine Aumer, Ph.D.

c.  
DOH Director  
DOH BHA Deputy Director  
DOH AMHD Administrator  
DOH CAMHD Administrator

JOSH B. GREEN, M.D.  
GOVERNOR OF HAWAII  
KE KIA'ĀINA O KA  
MOKU'ĀINA 'O HAWAI'I



KATHERINE AUMER, PhD  
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**STATE OF HAWAI'I**  
**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH**  
**KA 'OIHANA OLAKINO**  
**STATE COUNCIL ON MENTAL HEALTH**  
P.O. Box 3378, Room 256  
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96801-3378

September 9, 2025

**CHAIRPERSON**

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Dr. Ruben Juarez

Dr. Alika Maunakea

Dr. Christopher Knightsbridge

Maui Wildfire Exposure Study

College of Social Sciences and John A. Burns School of Medicine

University of Hawaii

Via email

Dear Dr. Juarez, Dr. Maunakea, and Dr. Knightsbridge,

On behalf of the State Council on Mental Health, I extend our deepest gratitude for your powerful and informative presentation on the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) during our August 12, 2025, meeting.

Your team's work in enrolling more than 2,000 participants—including 200 children—provides an essential foundation for understanding the wildfire's long-term impacts. The findings you shared regarding depression, anxiety, PTSD, and toxic exposure are sobering. Your commitment to addressing these challenges—through the registry, referrals to services, and culturally informed support—is both reassuring and necessary.

We are honored to send a letter of support for your grant-seeking efforts to continue and expand this important work. Your research advances knowledge and provides a pathway for healing, recovery, and long-term well-being in the community. We encourage more defined collaboration with partners, including Certified Community Behavioral Health Clinics, the Department of Education, Department of Human Services MedQUEST Division, and other health coverage providers.

*Page 2. SCMH September 9, 2025 Letter to Dr. Juarez, Dr. Maunakea, and Dr. Knightsbridge*

Once again, thank you for your time, expertise, and unwavering dedication to the people of Maui and all others impacted by wildfire disasters. We are inspired by your leadership and look forward to witnessing the transformative impact of your work in the years ahead.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Katerine Aumer'.

Katherine Aumer, Ph.D.

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/14/2026 1:53:17 PM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Yamilet Jurado	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair and members of the Higher Education Committee,

My name is Yamilet Jurado, and I am a Maui wildfire survivor. I am writing in strong support of SB2969, which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

As someone who was personally affected by the fires, I understand deeply the challenges our community continues to face while trying to rebuild our lives. Many of us are still recovering emotionally, physically, and financially. Even now, many families—including myself—do not yet have permanent housing and continue to live in temporary places while trying to regain stability.

The impacts of the fires did not end in August 2023. Many residents continue to experience health concerns, including respiratory issues, mental health challenges, and uncertainty about the long-term effects of exposure, especially for children and medically vulnerable individuals.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry are extremely important because they provide ongoing health monitoring, early detection, and support for our community. These programs also create meaningful employment opportunities for local residents, helping our community not only care for one another but also rebuild economically.

Continuing this work ensures that the people of Maui are not forgotten and that our community receives the long-term care, research, and protection we truly need.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to support SB2969 so that these vital programs can continue to serve our community.

Mahalo for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to the health and recovery of Maui's people.

Sincerely,

Yamilet Jurado

**LATE**

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/16/2026 10:20:09 AM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Amy Jackson	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I am writing to ask for your support for SB2969 SD1. I barely escaped Front Street the day of the Lahaina fire only to fight for my life just 1 year later.

I participated in the wildfire study for 100\$ cash. My daughter was turning 13 and I didn't have money for her birthday gift. The doctor at the study said my Hemoglobin was so low it wouldn't register a number on their equipment. I was sent to the Emergency Room and admitted for multiple blood transfusions and months of treatment.

I did not know I was sick. I had fatigue and shortness of breath with activity that I attributed to turning 50.

Participation in the study saved my physical life and also my mental health. I have gotten help for PTSD after the questionnaire helped me realized I needed it. As a single mother I am grateful to still be here for my children. Mahalo for allowing me to tell my story. Please continue to fund the Maui WES for healing the island of Maui and the lahui.

**LATE**

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/16/2026 10:55:54 AM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Stephanie Villalobos	Individual	Support	Remotely Via Zoom

Comments:

**Aloha Chair and Members of the Finance Committee,**

My name is Stephanie Villalobos, and I am a Maui resident, community member, and Community Care Navigator with Roots Reborn. I am writing in strong support of SB 2969, which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

I personally participated in the study, and it was extremely well organized and impactful. Through the process, I learned how deeply the stress and heartbreak of losing friends in the wildfire had affected my own health. I realized that I had not been taking care of myself in ways I thought I was. The study helped me better understand my physical and mental health in ways that I would not have discovered through a regular doctor’s visit alone. In particular, the mental health screening encouraged important conversations with my physician that I might not have otherwise initiated.

The impacts of the August 2023 wildfires did not end when the fires were extinguished. Many residents continue to experience ongoing health concerns, including respiratory problems, mental health challenges, and uncertainty about long-term exposure effects — especially children and medically vulnerable individuals.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry provide trusted, community-based care, early detection, and critical referrals that would otherwise be inaccessible to many families. Continued funding ensures that residents are not forgotten and that health concerns are identified early, before they become emergencies.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to support SB 2969 and ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve.

Mahalo for your time, consideration, and commitment to the health of our community.

Sincerely,  
Stephanie Villalobos

**LATE**

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/16/2026 11:02:13 AM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
May Okihiro	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha,

I am a pediatrician at the Waianae Coast Comprehensive Health Center and have over 25 years of experience working with Hawaii’s families. I am writing in strong support of SB2969 which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

The impacts of the Maui wildfires did not end in 2023. Indeed, we know wildfire victims continue to experience the negative impact on their health and well-being. This is especially true for children, youth and other vulnerable individuals. Monitoring and supporting on-going services and resources for these community members will be essential as we work to rebuild the community. The Maui Wildlife Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry have become a trusted sources of community-based monitoring, early detection and referral for many families.

As a pediatrician, I have seen the negative outcomes when we ignore those who have endured harmful and traumatic events such as the Maui Wildfires. Policy makers too often are short sighted when they only fund health program once a huge problem has developed.

As such, continued funding of the Maui Wildlife Exposure Study and Maui Health Registry is essential and will be cost effective to support the best outcomes for these community members who have endured so much.

I kindly ask that you support SB2969.

Mahalo,

May Okihiro

**LATE**

**SB-2969-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/16/2026 12:06:35 PM

Testimony for HED on 3/16/2026 2:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Amy Hou	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair and members of the Finance Committee,

My name is **Dr. Amy Hou**, and I am a resident, survivor, parent, and healthcare worker. I am writing in **strong support of HB 2340**, which would provide funding to continue and expand the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry.

**The aftermath of the Lahaina fires is a long commitment to serving and working alongside survivors to support and monitor for long-term impacts of the Lahaina fires. This study is very important to tracking the health and well-being of residents, and to offer important data to healthcare workers and public health workers on how best to support our Lahaina community. I was affected by the Lahaina fires, and I also contributed through Maui District Health Office in the re-entry programs when survivors first could visit their homes, and I am acutely aware of the various issues they dealt and continue to deal with.**

The impacts of the wildfires did not end in August 2023. Many residents continue to experience ongoing health concerns, including respiratory problems, mental health challenges, and uncertainty about long-term effects, especially for children and other medically vulnerable individuals.

Programs like the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study and the Maui Health Registry provide trusted, community-based care, early detection, and referrals that would otherwise be inaccessible to many families. Continued funding will help ensure that people are not forgotten and that health issues are identified before they become emergencies.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to **support HB 2340** and ensure that Maui residents continue to receive the care, follow-up, and protection they deserve.

Mahalo for your time, consideration, and commitment to the health of our communities.

Sincerely,  
**Amy Hou, MD**