



STATE OF HAWAII
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH
KA 'OIHANA OLAKINO
P. O. Box 3378
Honolulu, HI 96801-3378
doh.testimony@doh.hawaii.gov

**Testimony in SUPPORT of SCR55/SR53
SUPPORTING THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE HAWAII'Ī WATER SAFETY
COALITION'S HAWAII'Ī WATER SAFETY PLAN.
SENATOR CAROL FUKUNAGA, CHAIR**

SENATE COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY AND MILITARY AFFAIRS

Monday, April 06, 2026 at 03:00 PM | Room Number: 016

- 1 **Fiscal Implications:** None. Potential future costs depend on agency implementation decisions
- 2 and associated budgeting.
- 3 **Department Position:** The Department of Health (“Department”) supports and appreciates this
- 4 resolution to support the findings and recommendations of the Hawaii Water Safety Plan.
- 5 **Department Testimony:** The Emergency Medical Services & Injury Prevention System Branch
- 6 (EMSIPSB) provides the following testimony on behalf of the Department.
- 7 Hawaii continues to face one of the highest drowning rates in the nation, affecting residents,
- 8 visitors, and especially our keiki. These tragedies are preventable, and they place long-term
- 9 emotional, physical, and economic strain on families and communities.
- 10 The Department actively supports the Hawaii Water Safety Coalition and the work they do to
- 11 bring together agencies, experts, and community partners to develop a comprehensive,
- 12 culturally grounded statewide plan that focuses on prevention, safety education, data
- 13 improvement, and coordinated action. The Coalition and plan offer practical, evidence based
- 14 steps to strengthen water safety across all islands, from expanding swim education for children

1 to improving aquatic environments, supporting lifeguard services, and enhancing statewide
2 coordination.

3 Adopting this resolution will help ensure that agencies and partners work together to carry out
4 these proven strategies and reduce preventable drownings across our state.

5 **Offered Amendments: None**

6 Mahalo for the opportunity to provide testimony and for your continued commitment
7 to water safety.



Dear Chair and Members of the Committee,

I am writing on behalf of **FreediveSafe! Hawai'i**, a leading community-driven initiative advancing spearfishing and breath-hold diving safety across our islands, to respectfully urge your support for adopting the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan, as proposed in the resolutions (SCR55 and SR53 or HCR155 and HR147) before your committee.

Every day, we work directly with ocean users—particularly spearfishers and freedivers—who are deeply connected to Hawai'i's waters. Through this work, we see firsthand that Hawai'i is in the midst of a drowning crisis. Our state has the second highest drowning rate in the nation, and drowning remains the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15 in Hawai'i.

FreediveSafe! Hawai'i was founded to address preventable tragedies in the ocean related to shallow water blackout and breath-hold diving risks—issues that are often under-recognized in broader water safety conversations. Through community trainings, safety education, and partnerships with schools and local leaders, we are actively building a culture of accountability, preparedness, and mālama for one another in the water.

We also recognize that this crisis is not equitable. Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders are disproportionately impacted, with significantly higher drowning rates—especially among youth. As an organization rooted in community and cultural practices like subsistence fishing, we believe strongly that water safety must be approached through the lens of equity, access, and cultural relevance.

The Hawai'i Water Safety Plan, developed by the Hawai'i Water Safety Coalition, represents an important step forward. By adopting this plan, Hawai'i can strengthen coordination across agencies and communities expand education and prevention efforts, and support initiatives like ours that are working to reach high-risk populations in meaningful ways.

FreediveSafe! Hawai'i stands in strong support of this plan and is committed to continuing our role as a community partner in advancing water safety across the state.

Mahalo for the opportunity to testify.

Sincerely,

Niki Roderick

FreediveSafe! Hawaii
75-5737 Kuakini Highway, #202
Kailua-Kona, Hawaii 96740
www.freedivesafe.org

April 3, 2026

Senator Fukunaga
House Committee on Public Safety

Hawai'i State Legislature

RE: **Support for SCR55 / SR53 – Hawai'i Water Safety Plan**

Aloha Chair Fukunaga



As President of the Hawaiian Lifeguard Association, I write in strong support of SCR55 / SR53 and the continued advancement of the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan.

Board of Directors

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Kirsten Hermstad
Executive Director

Honorary Legends

Ralph Goto
Brian Keaulana
Archie Kalepa
Mark Cunningham

For those of us working on the front lines of ocean and public safety, the need for a coordinated, statewide approach to water safety is clear. Hawai'i faces unique and persistent risks, shaped by our ocean environment, high levels of public access, and the significant number of residents and visitors who enter the water each day.

The Hawai'i Water Safety Plan represents an important step forward. It brings together agencies, organizations, and community partners around a shared framework focused on prevention, coordination, and long-term impact. This kind of alignment is essential to reducing drowning and improving safety outcomes across our islands.

Lifeguards see firsthand the consequences of gaps in awareness, coordination, and access to information. We also see the difference that proactive education, consistent messaging, and collaborative efforts can make. A statewide plan helps ensure that these efforts are not isolated but instead reinforced and expanded through partnership.

This resolution supports a more unified and strategic approach—one that reflects both the complexity of the challenge and the collective responsibility to address it.

On behalf of the Hawaiian Lifeguard Association, I respectfully urge your support for HCR155.

Mahalo for your leadership and your commitment to the safety and wellbeing of our communities.

Hawaiian Lifeguard Association
P.O. Box 844
Kapa'a, Hawaii 96746
Tax Id 99-0308213

Sincerely,

Kalani Vierra

Kalani Vierra
President
Hawaiian Lifeguard Association



April 3, 2026

The Senator Fukunaga
Hawai'i State Legislature

RE: Support SCR55 / SR53 – Hawai'i Water Safety Plan

Aloha Chair Fukunaga,

I write as Coordinator of the Hawai'i Water Safety Coalition (HWSC) in strong support of SCR55 / SR53 and the continued advancement of the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan.

The Hawai'i Water Safety Coalition was established to bring together diverse partners across sectors—including ocean safety, public safety, healthcare, government, education, the visitor industry, private industry, and community organizations—to address one of the State's most persistent and preventable public health challenges: drowning.

Hawai'i's risk profile is unique. High visitor volumes, dynamic ocean conditions, and widespread exposure to aquatic environments create a complex safety landscape that requires coordination across agencies and disciplines. No single entity can address this challenge alone.

The Hawai'i Water Safety Plan provides a framework for that coordination. It supports data-driven decision making, aligns prevention strategies, and strengthens communication and collaboration across jurisdictions and sectors. Importantly, it shifts the focus from reactive response to proactive prevention—reducing incidents before they occur.

From the coalition's perspective, this plan is not theoretical. It reflects ongoing work already being carried out by partners across the state and provides a structure to grow, strengthen and sustain those efforts over time. SCR55 / SC53 affirms the importance of this coordinated approach and supports continued progress toward reducing drowning and improving water safety outcomes statewide.

For these reasons, the Hawai'i Water Safety Coalition respectfully urges your support.

Mahalo for your leadership and your commitment to the safety and wellbeing of our communities.

Sincerely,

Kirsten Hermstad
Coordinator, Hawai'i Water Safety Coalition
Executive Director, Hawaiian Lifeguard Association

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 4:02:47 PM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Sarah Fairchild	Testifying for Outrigger Duke Kahanamoku Foundation	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

The Outrigger Duke Kahanamoku Foundation submits this testimony in strong support of the resolutions before your committee calling for the adoption of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan.

As an organization rooted in the legacy of Duke Kahanamoku — a celebrated waterman, Olympic champion, and lifelong ambassador of aloha — water safety is not simply a policy priority for us. It is central to our mission and to the values Duke embodied throughout his life.

The data before us is sobering. Hawai‘i has the second-highest drowning rate in the nation. Drowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15 in our state, and the number one cause of injury-related death among visitors to our islands.

This crisis strikes at the heart of communities whose identities are inseparably linked to the ocean. Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) drown at approximately 1.5 times the rate of the general population, and NHPI children drown at three times that rate. Duke Kahanamoku shared the gift of the ocean with the world without exception; we have a responsibility to ensure that gift is accessible and safe for all, particularly for the communities most deeply connected to these waters.

The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan provides a drowning prevention framework developed from community-based participatory research to prevent drownings and save lives.

The Outrigger Duke Kahanamoku Foundation respectfully urges this committee to adopt the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan. In doing so, you will honor the spirit of Duke Kahanamoku and help ensure that Hawai‘i's waters remain a source of life, culture, and joy — not tragedy.

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/4/2026 10:30:40 AM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Carol Wilcox	Testifying for Snorkel Safety Study	Oppose	In Person

Comments:

This report is incomplete. It has failed to address fatal and non-fatal snorkel-related drownings which are the leading cause of drownings in Hawaii, and a significant risk to our visitors. It recommends expensive new regulations for an already strapped budget without considering much cheaper and potentially more effective public health warnings.

Despite repeated requests to be on the Committee or to present the findings of the Snorkel Safety Study to the Committee, and assurances that it will do so, no such action has taken place.

While this is a commendable effort, until it shows a more comprehensive approach to ocean safety it should not be adapted as the policy of the State.

I am writing as the Snorkel Safety Study Project Manger, the findings which are published at SnorkelSafetyStudy.com.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Carol Wilcox



April 4, 2026

TESTIMONY IN STRONG SUPPORT OF SCR 55. Hearing on April 6, 2026

To: Senate Committee on Public Safety, Senator Chris Lee, Vice Chair, and Committee Members.

Aloha Senator Carol Fukunaga, Chair and Members,

The Keiki Injury Prevention Coalition (KIPC) strongly supports SCR 55/SR 53.

KIPC is a statewide organization dedicated to preventing injuries to Hawai'i's keiki and youth. We proudly served as a fiscal sponsor for the development of the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan.

Drowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1–15 in our state. In the past five years, 26 keiki drowned — most in swimming pools. Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander keiki face disproportionately higher risks, and fewer than 2% of second graders have basic water safety skills.

These deaths are preventable. The Hawai'i Water Safety Plan offers a clear, locally tailored roadmap with practical recommendations:

- **Water safety and swim education in schools**
- **Expanded access to affordable swim lessons**
- **Stronger adult supervision tools and pool safety standards**
- **Culturally grounded programs that honor Hawaiian values**

We urge the Legislature to adopt SCR 55/SR 53. This resolution will help make the Plan the guiding document for statewide action, saving keiki lives and ensuring our children can safely enjoy Hawai'i's waters.

Mahalo nui loa for your support. We are ready to assist with implementation.

Sincerely,

**Lisa Dau, RN, Injury Prevention Coordinator
Keiki Injury Prevention Coalition**

<https://kipchawaii.org/>



*Testimony of
Mufi Hannemann
President & CEO
Hawai'i Lodging & Tourism Association*

*Committee on Finance
Monday, April 6, 2026*

SCR 55 – SUPPORTING THE FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE HAWAI'I WATER SAFETY COALITION'S HAWAI'I WATER SAFETY PLAN.

Chair Fukunaga, Vice Chair Lee, and Members of the Committee,

The Hawai'i Lodging & Tourism Association (HLTA) **strongly supports SCR 55**, which endorses the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan developed by the Hawai'i Water Safety Coalition.

As the state's largest private sector tourism organization, representing nearly 50,000 hotel rooms and 40,000 lodging employees, HLTA recognizes that visitor and resident safety is foundational to Hawai'i's success as a global destination. Drowning remains the leading cause of injury-related death among visitors to Hawai'i, and highly publicized incidents can have lasting impacts on visitor confidence and the State's reputation.

From a tourism industry perspective, water safety is a destination management priority. Hawai'i's natural environment, particularly its beaches and ocean resources, is central to the visitor experience. However, many visitors are unfamiliar with local ocean conditions, hazards such as strong currents, and even non-ocean water risks, including pools and water features. This underscores the need for clear, consistent, and culturally appropriate safety education and infrastructure statewide.

The Hawai'i Water Safety Plan provides a comprehensive, data-driven framework to address these challenges. As outlined in SCR 55, the plan emphasizes coordinated leadership, expanded water safety education, improved data collection, strengthened safety infrastructure, and increased access to swim instruction, particularly for children and underserved communities.

Importantly, the plan also aligns with broader efforts to promote sustainable and responsible tourism, ensuring that both residents and visitors can safely enjoy Hawai'i's natural resources. Investments in prevention such as lifeguard services, signage, and public awareness will help reduce incidents before they occur, benefiting communities and the visitor industry alike.

HLTA also recognizes that drowning incidents disproportionately impact certain communities and that addressing these disparities is essential to building a safer and more equitable Hawai'i. A coordinated statewide approach, as proposed in the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan, is critical to achieving these outcomes.

For these reasons, HLTA respectfully urges the Committee to **adopt SCR 55 and support the implementation of the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan.**

Mahalo for your time and consideration.

Mufi Hannemann
President & CEO
Hawai'i Lodging & Tourism Association



Hawai'i State Capitol
415 South Beretania St.
Honolulu, HI 96813

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SCR55 and SR53 Relating to Hawai'i Water Safety Plan:

Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Public Safety and Military Affairs Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. As a leading child safety organization working to protect all children from preventable injuries, we urge you to support **adopting the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan**, as proposed in the resolutions **SCR55 and SR53** before your committee.

Both nationally and in Hawai'i, drowning is the leading cause of death among young children, ages one through four.ⁱ In Hawai'i, the risk is even more pronounced, with drowning remaining the leading cause of death through age 15. Out of all 50 states, Hawai'i has the **second-highest drowning rate in the nation**. For every child that passes, seven more visit the ER.ⁱⁱ These frightening and tragic events for families across the islands highlight the urgent need for coordinated prevention efforts.

At Safe Kids Worldwide, we envision a world in which every child is protected from preventable injuries, where everyone is safe in, on, and around water. As it stands, **Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) drown at approximately 1.5 times the rate of Hawai'i's general population**, and **NHPI children drown at three times the rate of the general population**. By making drowning prevention a priority and centering water safety education, we can reach underserved communities and reduce the threat to these communities.

The Hawai'i Water Safety Plan was developed by the **Hawai'i Water Safety Coalition**, a statewide partnership of government agencies, first responders, medical professionals, nonprofits, and community leaders. In 2025, we awarded the **Safe Kids Champion for Children Award** to the Hawai'i Water Safety Coalition for their work in developing this Water Safety Plan and its significant impact in the field of child injury prevention.

Adopting the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan would provide a comprehensive, data-driven framework to reduce drownings, improve coordination, strengthen education and prevention, and ultimately save lives across the islands.

Safe Kids Worldwide is a nonprofit organization working to reduce unintentional injuries to children ages 0-19 and build sustainable systems that support injury prevention. Safe Kids works

with strategic partners and an extensive network of more than 400 coalitions in the U.S. to reduce traffic injuries, drownings, sleep-related deaths, falls, burns, poisonings, and more.

Thank you for your consideration.

Safe Kids Worldwide

ⁱ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *WONDER Underlying Cause of Death*. Available at: <http://wonder.cdc.gov/>.

ⁱⁱ Safe Kids Worldwide. *Open Water Drowning by the Numbers*. Available at: https://www.safekids.org/sites/default/files/fast_facts_ow_drowning.pdf

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC SAFETY AND MILITARY AFFAIRS

Senator Carol Fukunaga, Chair
Senator Chris Lee, Vice Chair



April 6, 2026

RE: SUPPORT OF SCR55 and SR53 *Adopting the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan*

Aloha Chair Fukunaga, Vice Chair Lee and committee members,

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit testimony. The Hawai'i Search and Rescue (SAR) Alliance is a collaborative effort of multiple agencies, teams, and organizations that consist of first responders, specifically those who conduct SAR operations across the State of Hawai'i. Our Alliance consists of subject matter experts—including local experts representing all relevant state agencies as well as national partners—who meet to determine best practices and support system development. We advocate for a safer Hawai'i with prevention as our first line of defense.

Hawai'i is currently in the midst of a **drowning crisis**. Our state has the **second-highest drowning rate in the nation**, and drowning is the **leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15 in Hawai'i**. It is also the **number one cause of injury-related death for Hawai'i's visitors**, highlighting the urgent need for coordinated prevention efforts. This data is alarming.

There is a **3-3-3 survival rule**: Humans can live three weeks without food, three days without water and **THREE minutes without breath**. In the water, **seconds make the difference between life and death**.

The recent storms in Hawai'i is evidence of how our communities are affected by the **increase of extreme weather**. Therefore, drowning must become a disaster reduction priority. **Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) drown at approximately 1.5 times the rate of Hawai'i's general population**, and **NHPI children drown at three times the rate of the general population**. These disparities make clear that water safety is not only a public safety issue, but also a matter of health equity.

The Hawai'i Water Safety Plan was developed by the **Hawai'i Water Safety Coalition**, a statewide partnership of government agencies, first responders, medical professionals, nonprofits, and community leaders. The Hawai'i Water Safety Plan has been **recognized nationally with a Safe Kids Champion for Children Award from Safe Kids Worldwide**.

The Hawai'i Water Safety Plan is a critical step in increasing safety through a comprehensive, data-driven framework to reduce drownings, improve coordination, strengthen education and prevention, and ultimately save lives across our islands.

I will be available for questions.

Mahalo

Rosemarie Johnson

BSE, MBA, MBB, TICC, Strategist

Director, Hawai'i SAR Alliance

Director@Hawai'iSARalliance.org

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 8:37:25 AM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Aubrie Jones-Owens	Individual	Support	In Person

Comments:

Aloha Chair Fukunaga and Vice Chair Lee,

I respectfully urge your support for the adoption of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan, as proposed in resolutions SCR55 and SR53, currently before your committee.

As an Ocean Safety Lifeguard, I see firsthand the drowning crisis affecting Hawai‘i. Our state has the second-highest drowning rate in the nation, and drowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15. It is also the number one cause of injury-related death for visitors to our islands.

The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan, developed by the Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition, provides a statewide, data-driven strategy to reduce drownings and strengthen water safety efforts across our islands.

Adopting this plan will help save lives and better protect our communities and visitors. Mahalo for your time and for your commitment to the safety of Hawai‘i.

Respectfully,

Aubrie Jones-Owens

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 9:48:03 AM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Eric Kvick	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Subject: Urgent Request to Adopt the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan

Aloha Chair Fukunaga and Vice Chair Lee,

I am writing to respectfully urge your support for adopting the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan, as proposed in the resolutions SCR55 and SR53 before your committee.

Hawai‘i is currently in the midst of a drowning crisis. Our state has the **second-highest drowning rate in the nation**, and drowning is the **leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15 in Hawai‘i**. It is also the **number one cause of injury-related death for Hawai‘i’s visitors**, highlighting the urgent need for coordinated prevention efforts.

The recent storms in Hawai‘i serve as a reminder that Hawai‘i is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including drowning, which must become a disaster reduction priority.

This crisis is **not equitable**. **Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) drown at approximately 1.5 times the rate of Hawai‘i’s general population**, and **NHPI children drown at three times the rate of the general population**. These disparities make clear that water safety is not only a public safety issue, but also a matter of health equity.

The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan was developed by the **Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition**, a statewide partnership of government agencies, first responders, medical professionals, nonprofits, and community leaders. The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan has been recognized nationally with a Safe Kids Champion for Children Award from Safe Kids Worldwide. It serves as a guide for strategic drowning and injury prevention initiatives state wide.

Adopting the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan would provide a comprehensive, data-driven framework to reduce drownings, improve coordination, strengthen education and prevention, and ultimately save lives across our islands.

Mahalo for your time, leadership, and commitment to protecting the people of Hawai‘i.

Sincerely,
Eric Kvick

honolulu

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 10:03:19 AM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Kelle Murphy	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Subject: Urgent Request to Adopt the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan

Aloha Chair Fukunaga and Vice Chair Lee,

I am writing to respectfully urge your support for adopting the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan, as proposed in the resolutions SCR55 and SR53 before your committee.

Hawai‘i is currently in the midst of a drowning crisis. Our state has the **second-highest drowning rate in the nation**, and drowning is the **leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15 in Hawai‘i**. It is also the **number one cause of injury-related death for Hawai‘i’s visitors**, highlighting the urgent need for coordinated prevention efforts.

The recent storms in Hawai‘i serve as a reminder that Hawai‘i is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including drowning, which must become a disaster reduction priority.

This crisis is **not equitable**. **Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) drown at approximately 1.5 times the rate of Hawai‘i’s general population**, and **NHPI children drown at three times the rate of the general population**. These disparities make clear that water safety is not only a public safety issue, but also a matter of health equity.

The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan was developed by the **Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition**, a statewide partnership of government agencies, first responders, medical professionals, nonprofits, and community leaders. The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan has been recognized nationally with a Safe Kids Champion for Children Award from Safe Kids Worldwide. It serves as a guide for strategic drowning and injury prevention initiatives state wide.

Adopting the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan would provide a comprehensive, data-driven framework to reduce drownings, improve coordination, strengthen education and prevention, and ultimately save lives across our islands.

Mahalo for your time, leadership, and commitment to protecting the people of Hawai‘i.

Kelle L. Murphy

Director Swim Safe: ASD program

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 10:25:25 AM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Kim Jorgensen	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I fully support resolutions SCR55 and SR53; and hope that you will adopt the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan as proposed in them.

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 10:26:15 AM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Denise Boisvert	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I fully support resolutions SCR55 and SR53; and hope that you will adopt the Hawai'i Water Safety Plan as proposed in them.

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 10:40:38 AM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Rachel Able	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SCR 55 & SR 53 Supporting the Findings and Recommendations of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition’s Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan

Submitted to the Hawai‘i State Legislature By: Rachel Able, Bereaved Mother and Concerned Resident of Kailua-Kona, Hawai‘i

Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Rachel Able, and I am a resident of Kailua-Kona, Hawai‘i. I come before you today not just as a concerned citizen, but as a mother who knows firsthand the devastation that drowning leaves in its wake. In 2022, I lost my daughter to a drowning accident — a tragedy that no parent should ever have to endure. I carry her with me every day, and it is her memory that compels me to stand before you now and urge your strong support of SCR 55 and SR 53.

I want to be very clear: this legislation is not a possibility. It is a necessity.

Drowning is the number one cause of death for children in Hawai‘i ages 1 through 15. Let that sink in. Not accidents. Not illness. Drowning. And yet, less than 2% of Hawai‘i’s second graders have the basic skills to avoid or recover from drowning. We are sending our children into one of the most water-surrounded states in the nation without equipping them with the most basic tools to survive it.

Hawai‘i’s resident drowning rate is the second highest in the nation. These are not just numbers on a page. These are our children. Our sisters. Our brothers. Our babies. My daughter. No mother wants her child to become a statistic — and yet, without action, that is exactly what will keep happening.

For too long, our response to drowning in this state has been reactive. We grieve, we mourn, we move on — until the next family is shattered. SCR 55 and SR 53 represent a turning point. They ask us to be **proactive**. They ask us to look at the findings and recommendations of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition’s Water Safety Plan and say: *We will act before another child dies*. I am asking you to do the same.

The Hawai'i Water Safety Plan is a roadmap to ensure that everyone in Hawai'i is safe in, on, or around the water. It incorporates guidance from the CDC and the World Health Organization and is tailored specifically to Hawai'i's unique ocean environment and the cultural and economic factors that shape our drowning rates. This plan was built with care, with data, and with urgency. Now it needs your support to become more than a document — it needs to become action.

I know what it is to sit by the phone, waiting for news that never gets better. I know what it is to plan a funeral for your own child. I am asking you — pleading with you — do not wait for more families to join me in that grief before you act. The time to move is now.

Please support SCR 55 and SR 53. Not because it might help. Because it **will** help. Because our children's lives depend on it. Because no mother, no father, no grandparent should ever have to do what I have done.

Mahalo for your time, and mahalo for your courage to do what is right.

Respectfully submitted,

Rachel Able Kailua-Kona, Hawai'i

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 11:17:05 AM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Louis Erteschik	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

In support.

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 1:17:54 PM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Karl "Buddy" Bohn	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

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

My name is Karl “Buddy” Bohn, retired Lifeguard Chief with the Los Angeles County Fire Department, with 38 years of service in water safety, rescue, and drowning prevention. I respectfully submit this testimony in strong support of SCR55 and SR53, urging the adoption of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan.

Having spent nearly four decades on the front lines of ocean rescue and public safety, I have witnessed firsthand the devastating and lasting consequences of drowning incidents on children, families, residents, and visitors. Drowning prevention is one of the most critical public safety responsibilities we share as a community.

Hawai‘i continues to face an urgent drowning crisis. Drowning remains one of the most preventable causes of death, yet the state continues to lag in implementing comprehensive prevention strategies. These realities require immediate, coordinated, and long-term action.

Based on my professional experience, warning signs alone are not an effective means of prevention, nor is it feasible to place lifeguard towers at every beach, shoreline, stream, and ocean access point throughout the islands. While lifeguards are an essential component of water safety, the most effective prevention begins long before an emergency occurs.

The most important solution is education at an early age — teaching children and families water safety awareness, swimming competency, hazard recognition, and respect for Hawai‘i’s unique ocean and inland water conditions. Prevention through education is the most effective way to save lives.

This need is made even more urgent as Hawai‘i faces increasingly severe weather events and the growing impacts of climate change, both of which heighten water-related risks and make drowning prevention an essential component of disaster risk reduction and community resilience.

The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan, developed by the Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition, provides a comprehensive, data-driven, statewide framework to strengthen education, improve interagency coordination, and implement proven prevention strategies. Its national recognition further reflects the strength and importance of this plan.

I strongly urge the committee to support SCR55 and SR53 and advance this critical measure to help protect Hawai'i's keiki, residents, and visitors from preventable drowning tragedies.

Mahalo for the opportunity to submit this testimony and for your leadership on this important matter.

Respectfully submitted,

Karl "Buddy" Bohn
Retired Lifeguard Chief, LA County Fire
Kapa'au, Hawai'i

Subject: Urgent Request to Adopt the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan
Aloha Chair Fukunaga and Vice Chair Lee,

I am writing to respectfully urge your support for adopting the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan, as proposed in the resolutions SCR55 and SR53 before your committee.

Hawai‘i is currently in the midst of a drowning crisis. Our state has the **second-highest drowning rate in the nation**, and drowning is the **leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15 in Hawai‘i**. It is also the **number one cause of injury-related death for Hawai‘i’s visitors**, highlighting the urgent need for coordinated prevention efforts.

The recent storms in Hawai‘i serve as a reminder that Hawai‘i is vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, including drowning, which must become a disaster reduction priority.

This crisis is **not equitable**. **Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) drown at approximately 1.5 times the rate of Hawai‘i’s general population**, and **NHPI children drown at three times the rate of the general population**. These disparities make clear that water safety is not only a public safety issue, but also a matter of health equity.

The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan was developed by the **Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition**, a statewide partnership of government agencies, first responders, medical professionals, nonprofits, and community leaders. The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan has been recognized nationally with a Safe Kids Champion for Children Award from Safe Kids Worldwide. It serves as a guide for strategic drowning and injury prevention initiatives state wide.

Adopting the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan would provide a comprehensive, data-driven framework to reduce drownings, improve coordination, strengthen education and prevention, and ultimately save lives across our islands.

Mahalo for your time, leadership, and commitment to protecting the people of Hawai‘i.

Sincerely,
Ruth Anne Tomlinson

Jackson, WY

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 10:34:15 PM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Allison Schaefer	Individual	Support	In Person

Comments:

My name is Allison Schaefer. I am a bereaved parent volunteer with the Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition and the lead writer of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan. I strongly support SCR55 and SR53 which endorse the findings and recommendations of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan.

The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan was developed by the Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition, a statewide partnership of more than 200 members, including government agencies, first responders, lifeguards, watermen and waterwomen, medical professionals, researchers, nonprofits, and community and cultural leaders. I donated my professional writing and project management skills to synthesize their expertise and data into an inclusive, easy-to-read plan designed to inspire our communities to move toward a Hawai‘i where everyone is safe on, in, and around the water. The state Department of Health provided much of the core data, and coalition member Nā Kama Kai underwrote the cost of having DTL, a Hawaiian Strategy Studio, provide graphic design and cultural guidance. It was a massive endeavor, reflecting the scale and seriousness of the problem we are trying to solve.

We are now a program of the Hawaiian Lifeguard Association, but the co-founders of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition, Jessamy Town Hornor and Sarah Fairchild, began this work under the fiscal sponsorship of the Keiki Injury Prevention Coalition, which remains one of our core partners.

The breadth of the coalition's partners underscores both the credibility of the work and the sustained concern about drowning across a variety of sectors in our island state.

The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan has been recognized nationally with a Safe Kids Champion for Children Award, presented at the Safe Kids Worldwide Annual Childhood Injury Prevention Convention. This award honors outstanding contributions to child injury prevention and underscores the plan’s credibility as a rigorous, evidence-based framework.

Torine Creppy, president of Safe Kids Worldwide, said in a statement, “It has been so gratifying to see what an enormous difference the coalition has been able to make. Efforts like this truly save lives—and we are honored to recognize this amazing team for its immeasurable contributions to the field of water safety.”

Hawai‘i is only the second state in the nation, after California, to release a statewide water safety plan in response to the U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan. While aligned with national evidence-informed actions, Hawai‘i’s plan is specifically tailored to the unique realities of our

islands, counties, cultures, and communities—because drowning risk here is different, and the consequences are severe.

Despite our deep cultural and economic connection to the ocean, Hawai‘i is facing a worsening and unacceptable drowning crisis. In 2023, Hawai‘i’s drowning rate reached 3.34 deaths per 100,000—**the second highest in the nation**. Drowning remains the **leading cause of death for Hawai‘i’s children ages 1 to 15**, and the **leading cause of injury-related death among visitors**. These are not rare or random tragedies. They happen with disturbing regularity, year after year, and they are largely preventable. Yet without a coordinated, statewide strategy, lives continue to be lost.

The impact of drowning is measured not only in lives cut short, but in staggering economic cost borne by the entire state. Using CDC methodology that combines direct medical expenses with the statistical value of a life, the 475 drowning deaths in Hawai‘i between 2019 and 2013 carried an estimated cost of **\$4.75 billion**. Each drowning death represents an average loss of **\$10 million**. These figures still underestimate the true burden, as they do not fully capture the lifelong costs of nonfatal drownings, which can result in permanent brain injury, chronic health conditions, prolonged hospitalizations, and decades of ongoing care.

This crisis is also profoundly inequitable. **Children with autism are 160× more likely to die from drowning** than their neurotypical peers.

Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities in Hawai‘i experience drowning at approximately **1.5 times the rate of the general population**, and NHPI children drown at **3 times the rate** of other children. Addressing drowning is therefore not only about public safety—it is a matter of health equity and justice.

Hawai‘i once provided swimming instruction in public schools, but that ended in the late 1980s. Today, fewer than **2% of Hawai‘i’s second graders** have the basic skills needed to keep themselves from drowning. This gap leaves children vulnerable during the years when drowning risk is highest. Expanding access to water safety education and swim instruction is a central recommendation of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan.

While most drowning deaths in Hawai‘i occur in the ocean, **children 5 years old and under are far more likely to drown in pools, ponds, and other inland waters**. In 2004, my five-year-old daughter, Charlotte “Sharkey” Schaefer, drowned in an improperly maintained and flooded detention pond. Her death was preventable. That loss is why this work is personal for me, and why I remain committed to making sure other families do not endure the same devastation.

Recent Kona-low storms further demonstrate why drowning prevention must be integrated into disaster preparedness and climate resilience planning. Flooding, extreme rainfall, and storm events dramatically increase drowning risk. The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan explicitly addresses drowning hazards during floods, storms, and extreme weather—conditions that are becoming more frequent and severe.

Legislative endorsement of this plan is both warranted and urgent. Endorsement affirms that the Legislature recognizes drowning as a preventable public health crisis with profound human, economic, and equity implications. It establishes a shared, evidence-based roadmap; strengthens cross-agency coordination; supports future funding and grant opportunities; and ensures continuity beyond individual programs or administrations. Most importantly, it signals to communities across the state that water safety is a statewide priority and a shared responsibility.

By endorsing the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan, you can help prevent needless drowning deaths and the devastation of nonfatal drowning injuries, reduce long-term costs, advance equity, and strengthen Hawai‘i’s resilience in a changing climate.

Mahalo for your leadership and for your commitment to protecting Hawai‘i’s children, families, and communities.

Sincerely,

Allison Schaefer

Bereaved Parent Volunteer, Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition

Lead Writer, Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 10:38:59 PM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Pamela Louise Ramsay	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

estimony in Support of SCR55 and SR53:

My name is Pamela Ramsay, and I am the grandmother of Charlotte “Sharkey” Schaefer, who drowned on February 28, 2004. It has been 22 years, but there is not a day that passes without thinking of her.

Charlotte could swim like a fish and had the courage of a lion. Her heart was so big that she jumped into a dirty, poorly maintained retention pond to save a younger friend who could not swim. She pushed him to safety, but she did not make it out herself. My granddaughter died a hero.

Of all my grandchildren, Sharkey was the one most like me—the way she walked, turned her head, rolled her eyes, and smiled with that dimpled grin. Her “I can do it” spirit, her sweet laughter, and her grandma kisses are unforgettable. My only comfort is knowing she loved God, and I believe she is waiting to welcome me with open arms.

Hawai‘i continues to lose far too many children to drowning. The state has the second highest drowning rates in the nation. Drowning is the leading cause of death for Hawai‘i’s children ages 1 to 15, and these deaths happen year after year. The fatal drowning rate is so very sad, because drowning is preventable.

I strongly support **SCR55 and SR53** and urge you to endorse the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan, which is designed to ensure that everyone in Hawai‘i is safe on, in and around the water. Please take action to support this roadmap of drowning prevention so that other grandmothers are not deprived of the hugs, laughter, and love that were taken from me.

Mahalo for protecting Hawai‘i’s keiki and families.

Pamela Ramsay

Grandmother of Charlotte “Sharkey” Schaefer

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 10:42:06 PM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Sheila Hill	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Testimony in Support of SCR55 and SR53:

My name is Sheila Hill, and I am a high school classmate of Allison Schaefer Dubovsky. I submit this testimony in strong support of HCR155 and HR147.

Allison and I grew up together, and I have watched her turn unimaginable personal loss into tireless advocacy to protect others. The death of her daughter, Charlotte “Sharkey” Schaefer, changed her life—and through her work, it is now helping change Hawai‘i for the better.

Hawai‘i has one of the highest drowning rates in the nation, and drowning remains the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15. These are not random accidents. They are preventable tragedies that continue year after year without a coordinated response.

The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan reflects deep collaboration among lifeguards, first responders, health professionals, educators, and community leaders. It is grounded in evidence, shaped by lived experience, and tailored to Hawai‘i’s unique waters and communities. I have seen firsthand the care, integrity, and purpose that went into this work.

Endorsing this plan is an important step toward saving lives and protecting keiki, families, and visitors. I urge you to support SCR55 and SR53 and help ensure that fewer families endure the kind of loss that shaped my classmate’s life forever.

Mahalo for your leadership and commitment to water safety in Hawai‘i.

Sheila Hill
High School Classmate of Allison Schaefer Dubovsky

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/3/2026 10:44:19 PM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
joshua schaefer	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Testimony in Strong Support of SCR55 and SR53

My name is Joshua Schaefer. I am the brother of Charlotte “Sharkey” Schaefer, who drowned in Hawai‘i while trying to save a child who did not know how to swim from a flooded and poorly maintained detention pond. I strongly support SCR55 and SR53, which endorse the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan.

Drowning is a serious and preventable public health crisis in Hawai‘i. Our state has one of the highest drowning rates in the nation. It is the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15 and a leading cause of injury-related death among visitors. These tragedies happen far too often, and they do not have to.

The Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan provides a coordinated, evidence-based roadmap to reduce drownings through education, prevention, and collaboration across agencies and communities. It reflects Hawai‘i’s unique ocean conditions, cultures, and risks.

My ohana’s loss is permanent. No ohana should have to experience this kind of grief. Endorsing this plan is an important step toward saving lives and protecting our keiki and communities.

Mahalo for your consideration and for taking action to make Hawai‘i safer.

Sincerely,

Joshua Schaefer

April 3, 2026

Subject: Urgent Request to Adopt the Hawaii Water Safety Plan

Aloha Chair Fukunaga and Vice Chair Lee,

We respectfully urge your support for adopting the Hawaii Water Safety Plan as outlined in SCR55 and SR53 before your committee.

Hawaii is currently facing a serious drowning crisis, with the second-highest drowning rate in the nation. Drowning is the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15 in Hawaii and the leading cause of injury-related death among visitors. These alarming statistics underscore the urgent need for coordinated, statewide prevention efforts.

Recent storms across Hawaii further highlight our vulnerability to climate-related impacts, including increased drowning risks. Water safety must be recognized as a critical component of disaster preparedness and public safety.

This crisis also reflects significant inequities. Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPI) experience drowning rates approximately 1.5 times higher than the state average, with NHPI children drowning at nearly three times the rate of other children. Addressing drowning prevention is therefore not only a public safety priority but also a matter of health equity.

The Hawaii Water Safety Plan, developed by the Hawaii Water Safety Coalition, represents a collaborative effort among government agencies, first responders, healthcare professionals, nonprofits, and community leaders. It has received national recognition, including the Safe Kids Champion for Children Award from Safe Kids Worldwide, and provides a strategic, data-driven framework for reducing drowning and water-related injuries statewide.

Adopting this plan will strengthen coordination, expand education and prevention initiatives, and ultimately save lives across our islands.

Mahalo for your leadership and commitment to the safety and well-being of the people of Hawaii.

Sincerely,

Susan and Anthony Gallo

Ewa Beach, HI

Handwritten signature of Susan and Anthony Gallo in black ink.

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/4/2026 11:34:55 AM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Dan Worden	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Chair Fukunaga and Vice Chair Lee, and members of the Committee,

I am writing in support of SR 53 and its companion measures, which call on the Legislature to adopt the findings and recommendations of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition's Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan.

Hawai‘i has the second-highest drowning rate in the nation, and drowning remains the leading cause of death for children ages one to fifteen in our state. Non-fatal drowning incidents, which occur at more than twice the rate of fatal drownings, frequently result in permanent injury and lasting hardship for families. These are preventable outcomes, and the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan provides a comprehensive, evidence-informed framework for preventing them, one that is aligned with the U.S. National Water Safety Action Plan and international best practices.

The plan's recommendations address the issue from multiple angles: expanding funding for the Department of Health to prioritize drowning prevention; requiring appropriate safety equipment at pools and aquatic environments; supporting lifeguard services statewide; ensuring access to free water safety and swimming instruction for children, including through school curricula; building and maintaining aquatic facilities in underserved communities; bringing public and private pools into compliance with the Virginia Graeme Baker Pool and Spa Safety Act; and reconvening the DLNR's beach and water safety task force. I urge the Legislature to support this resolution and to call on the relevant state agencies and counties to collaborate with the HWSC on its implementation.

Thank you for the opportunity to voice my opinion, and I appreciate your time and consideration of this resolution.

Dan Worden

SR-53

Submitted on: 4/5/2026 12:53:23 PM

Testimony for PSM on 4/6/2026 3:00:00 PM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Nick Dubovsky	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Testimony in Strong Support of SCR55 and SR53

My name is **Nick Dubovsky**. I am Charlotte “Sharkey” Schaefer’s stepfather and the husband of **Allison Schaefer Dubovsky**, the lead writer of the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan. I strongly support **SCR55 and SR53**.

Charlotte drowned in Hawai‘i in 2004 while trying to save a child who did not know how to swim. She was brave, capable, and compassionate beyond her years. She acted without hesitation, but she lost her life because the conditions around her were unsafe and because her friends, like most children in Hawai‘i, could not swim. Our ohana lives with loss every day.

Drowning is not a rare accident in Hawai‘i. It is a preventable public health crisis. Hawai‘i continues to have one of the highest drowning rates in the nation, and drowning remains the leading cause of death for children ages 1 to 15. These deaths happen year after year, often without change or accountability.

My wife poured her professional skills and her grief into helping write the Hawai‘i Water Safety Plan and I lent early graphic design expertise because no ohana should have to endure the pain that ours continues to experience. The plan brings together recommendations and best practices from lifeguards, first responders, health professionals, educators, and community leaders to provide a clear, coordinated path forward.

Endorsing this plan means recognizing that drowning prevention saves lives, protects keiki, and spares families from lifelong heartbreak. I urge you to support SCR55 and SR53 and help make Hawai‘i safer for everyone who lives here and visits our waters.

Mahalo for your leadership and consideration.

Nick Dubovsky

Stepfather of Charlotte “Sharkey” Schaefer

Hawai‘i Water Safety Coalition Volunteer