

ACT 256

S.B. NO. 2457

A Bill for an Act Relating to Immigrant Resource Centers.

Be It Enacted by the Legislature of the State of Hawaii:

SECTION 1. The legislature finds that Hawaii has a long history of welcoming immigrants. These immigrants and their children have made, and continue to make, significant contributions to the State. Immigrants continue to play a vital role in Hawaii's economy, workforce, and community.

The legislature further finds that immigrants make up approximately two hundred fifty thousand members, or eighteen per cent, of Hawaii's population, including one hundred forty-five thousand persons who are naturalized citizens. Immigrants make up forty per cent of agricultural workers, thirty-three per cent of tourism and hospitality workers, and twenty-three per cent of health care workers in the State. Despite these numbers, many immigrants face barriers to success, including discrimination, cultural misunderstanding, and lack of language access to government information and services. Immigrants are family, neighbors, co-workers, business owners, and professionals. The legislature finds that recent immigrants and naturalized citizens need and deserve access to government services so that they may fully participate in and contribute to our community.

The legislature also finds that in 1985, the legislature established the office of community services. The office of community services' legislative mandate and mission is to serve low-income individuals, immigrants, and refugees. In establishing the office of community services, the legislature effectively consolidated four anti-poverty agencies administering state and federal funds: the office of the progressive neighborhoods program, the Hawaii office of economic opportunity, the refugee resettlement program, and the state immigrant services center. Previously, the state immigrant services center was a part of the governor's office, and it received significant funding and staffing to serve immigrants and refugees before its consolidation and establishment as an agency attached to the department of labor and industrial relations.

The legislature believes that the director and staff of the office of community services have successfully served low-income families and communities by administering millions of dollars in federal funds and grants-in-aid. Immigrants and refugees can also benefit from these services, but these programs do not address the needs of immigrants and refugees who have limited English proficiency or who are unfamiliar with government regulations and benefits. House Concurrent Resolution No. 169, Regular Session of 2021, requested a report on ways to "improve access to government services for immigrants and increase immigrant opportunities to make civic and economic contributions to the community." Community groups noted that the office of community services is the primary state agency to serve immigrants and that there is a need for a dedicated staff assigned to address immigrant and refugee matters and reinstate immigrant resource centers. Unfortunately, funding for the office of community services was previously reduced by approximately \$700,000, and immigrant resource centers have not been available for years.

The legislature also believes that it is the State's responsibility to enforce laws and provide programs to benefit the State. Among the groups that face barriers to equal access to services are those with limited English proficiency. Staff and additional resources are needed so that the office of community services may meet its legislative mandate and mission to serve low-income individuals, immigrants, and refugees.

Accordingly, the purpose of this Act is to appropriate funds for the office of community services so that the office may fund immigrant resource centers with an outreach component.

SECTION 2. There is appropriated out of the general revenues of the State of Hawaii the sum of \$1,000,000 or so much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2022-2023 for the office of community services to restore funding for immigrant resource centers for the purpose of providing staff and resources to assist immigrant and refugee populations throughout the State; provided that the office of community services shall include an outreach component in the services it provides.

The sum appropriated shall be expended by the department of labor and industrial relations for the purposes of this Act.

SECTION 3. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2022.

(Approved July 7, 2022.)