

ACT 271

H.B. NO. 237

A Bill for an Act Relating to Peer Support Programs.

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

SECTION 1. The legislature finds that parenting can be challenging for anyone, but especially for parents and families whose basic needs are not met. Parents and caregivers who lack needed support may experience depression and mental health challenges, intimate partner violence, child abuse and neglect, and substance addiction. This in turn may cause early childhood trauma for the children under their care.

The legislature further finds that each year in Hawaii, close to six hundred children from birth to age five are confirmed to be victims of child abuse and neglect, although the actual number of cases may be as much as five times greater. The legislature notes that half of all children in the child welfare system are under the age of five. Child rearing practices and handling parenting responsibilities made up the majority of contributing factors to child abuse and neglect, along with drug use. Child abuse and neglect impacts brain development and is costly, with the total lifetime economic burden associated with child abuse and neglect estimated to be \$2,600,000,000 in Hawaii. The legislature additionally finds that fifty-eight per cent of Hawaii children live in families made vulnerable by adverse childhood experiences, which include family violence, substance abuse, untreated family mental health issues, divorce, or incarceration.

The legislature additionally finds that peer-to-peer support programs provide people with an instant and cost-effective safety net. Parents and caregivers have a place where they can learn, get screening and referrals, share resources, and build their self-confidence. The goal of these programs is to keep parents

and children together, strengthen and grow community support and services, and increase the sense of hope and self-assurance amongst parents and caregivers of young children. Peer-to-peer support programs have also proven to be effective in reducing negative parenting practices, connecting victims of intimate partner violence to appropriate support, and encouraging completion of substance use disorder programs.

The legislature notes that investing early in peer-to-peer support programs can save millions of taxpayer dollars in downstream interventions. Research has shown that investing in the prenatal-to-five-year time period can save seven times in downstream costs, including reducing costs associated with treatment programs, child welfare programs, special education programs, and incarceration.

The purpose of this Act is to support parents and caregivers of children from birth to age five by appropriating funds to the family health services division of the department of health to establish and oversee peer-to-peer support programs.

SECTION 2. There is appropriated out of the general revenues of the State of Hawaii the sum of \$860,000 or so much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2025-2026 and the same sum or so much thereof as may be necessary for fiscal year 2026-2027 for the family health services division of the department of health to establish and support peer-to-peer support programs for families with children from birth to age five, to be expended as follows:

- (1) \$200,000 for one full-time equivalent (1.0 FTE) program specialist V position and one full-time equivalent (1.0 FTE) program specialist IV position;
- (2) \$270,000 for purchase of service contracts with neighborhood or location peer-to-peer based groups; and
- (3) \$390,000 for purchase of service contracts for addiction and child welfare peer support programs.

The sums appropriated shall be expended by the department of health for the purposes of this Act.

SECTION 3. This Act shall take effect on July 1, 2025.

(Approved July 2, 2025.)