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# Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i Policy Initiative

## Improving Advocacy by Telling Our Stories

By Leah Delos Santos

A Native Hawaiian student in the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa social work program, who is also a recovering addict and formerly incarcerated person, shared her personal account with state legislators. "I went to numerous treatment facilities in and out of prison for the past 18 years," she said. "It took me to go back to prison to find myself and get grounded. I completed substance abuse treatment, life skills training, self-development classes, college courses, worked a job I enjoyed doing, exercised, but what made me feel whole was practicing my culture."

The student testified movingly in support of the 2022 legislative session Native Hawaiian Rehabilitation bill (SB 2770), sharing her own journey of reconnecting with culture and educating others in Hawaiian language, dance, and history. In her testimony, she highlighted the cultural aspects of rehabilitation, such as generational trauma, inner healing and mental health, and relationships with the land and other members of the community.

"The loss of land, language, and culture has resulted in significant intergenerational, historical, and political trauma for Native Hawaiians," the student explained in a way that was personal and created connection with legislators. Though the bill didn't pass yet, the Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i hui will continue to seek out personal stories to improve the effectiveness of our advocacy efforts, create policy-maker champions, and raise awareness about OYAH issues.

**Editors: Leah Delos Santos & Melissa Pavlicek**  
1099 Alakea St., Suite 2530  
Honolulu, Hawai'i 96813  
(808) 447-1840  
[www.oyahpolicy.com](http://www.oyahpolicy.com)

**ANNIVERSARY**

We've marked the anniversary of our advocacy work together in partnership with Hawai'i Public Policy Advocates, Melissa Pavlicek, and our awesome policy interns, Leah Delos Santos, Lyla Gonsalves, Haumea Velasco, and Harley Broyles who have helped advance our OYAH work. Together they have been a part of our journey by tracking bills, sharing testimony, researching, developing priorities with us, building awareness and relationships about key issues, and overall, helping to make a difference for youth through our state. Mahalo piha! Na'u Nō, Shawn Kana'iaupuni

### Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i Policy Priorities

The Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i Hui advocates for legislative and other policy initiatives, including Native Hawaiian equity in the criminal justice system, workforce training and development, trauma-informed care, and the education, mental health and well-being of youth.

#### Youth Programs and Services

- Increase access to resources to address adolescent and young adult mental health needs
- Improve continuity of programs and services for youth and young adults transitioning from minor to adult status, including extending Hawai'i's Youth Right to Housing law
- Promote and fund more holistic and culturally-informed approaches among public/private agencies serving youth
- Support agriculture and ranching commercial opportunities at the Kawaiiloa Family Wellness Center that can be used to fund expanded youth programs
- Collect and share data on the success of programs and services in supporting youth and young adults

#### Justice System

- Reduce the harmful effects of a punitive incarceration system for youth
- Promote equity in the justice system
- Promote a process for appropriate youth emancipation proceedings

#### Homelessness/Housing

- Eliminate youth homelessness and housing market discrimination against young adults seeking housing
- Secure a cost-of-living increase for stipend for young people aging out of foster care
- Raise awareness about rights of minors to housing

#### Abuse and Trafficking

- Create a reporting system for the abuse of minors whose state-provided benefits are used by adults who no longer care for them
- Increase and improve the continuum of care for trafficked youth

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