

Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i Policy Initiative

Seeking to End Chronic Homelessness

A state House committee advanced, but a state Senate committee deferred (did not yet advance), a measure that the OYAH policy interns monitored, thinking it might result in important data being collected. Senate Concurrent Resolution 67 and House Concurrent 45 propose a study to consider the cost of shelter space, transitional housing, permanent supportive housing, housing assistance, stabilization facilities, substance abuse treatment, health care, mental health mental services, outreach programming, and other social services necessary to end chronic homelessness. HCR 45 will next be referred to the House Finance Committee.

What youth need to succeed (it's not what you might think)

By Haumea Velasco, Leah Delos Santos and Sydney Story

Discipline and a college degree are adult ideas of what students need to succeed. For youth who have a roof over their head and social support, no doubt that's at least partially true. As policy interns with Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i (OYAH), however, we now know that a significant number of Hawaii youth lack both a home and a supportive family. These youth are hungry, homeless or forced into crime. They need more than tough love or lock up. Policy leaders have the chance to make a difference for these youth, known as opportunity youth, in the state Legislature right now. "Opportunity youth" are children and young adults under the age of 25 who are disconnected from school and work. Life circumstances, such as low family income, parental absence, neglect or

abuse, can disrupt a youth's ability to fully take advantage of these opportunities. Native Hawaiians are disproportionately represented among opportunity youth. According to a recent Point In Time count, over half of all homeless individuals identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, although this group only represents roughly 20% of the state's entire population. Of the homeless population counted, 732 are children. We feel called to speak on their behalf.

We support legislation known as "Youth Right to Housing," as every child deserves a safe space to stay. Senate Bill 129 and House Bill 470 repeal the sunset date for Act 23 (2021 Session Laws of Hawaii), providing no-cost emergency

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Haumea Velasco, left, and Sydney Story, right, are first-year law students at the William S. Richardson School of Law, University of Hawai'i-Manoa; Leah Delos Santos is a sophomore at UH-Manoa.

shelter and related services to a consenting minor. We work closely with the leaders of Residential Youth Services & Empowerment (RYSE), a provider of these services. We also support establishing a judicial youth emancipation program — a legal process through which a minor in specific circumstances can be granted the status of an adult, proposed in HB 349.

For youth who need to escape a dangerous or abusive household, emancipation can offer independence and protection from their parents or guardians. Emancipation averts future abuse by preventing the minor from being returned to an abusive environment and allowing them to make decisions about their own

wellbeing. RYSE has sheltered, on an emergency basis, more than 30 unaccompanied minors here in Hawaii. These individuals live independently of their parents and have been making their own decisions about education, employment and health needs. Without the option of emancipation, these youth must remain in temporary shelter settings until they turn 18.

OYAH is a collective of organizations and individuals who share the common goal of enhancing the lives of opportunity youth in Hawaii. Rooted in Native Hawaiian cultural practices, OYAH organizations strive to supplement learning and hard work with Native Hawaiian customs such as *mālama* and *aloha 'āina*. Given Hawaii's rich cultural environment, OYAH organizations take advantage of the unique cultural rehabilitation opportunities and put an emphasis on learning and personal growth. We hope to see policy leaders who understand the need for success strategies not just for those who are most supported. Opportunity youth are our future, too. Our only choice as a community is to nurture them at every step in their young lives. If we bring them up with unconditional love and unremitting positive regard, they will do the same for us and our communities.

OYAH policy interns Haumea Velasco, Leah Delos Santos, and Sydney story raised awareness about the youth right-to-housing and emancipation bills by submitting an opinion editorial to the Honolulu Star Advertiser.

OYAH Policy Priorities as of March 23

Houselessness:

HB 470: Relating to Minors; Repeals the sunset date of Act 23, Session Laws of Hawai'i 2021
SB 129: Relating to Minors; Requires providers of no-cost emergency shelter and related services to maintain separation for unrelated adults and minor children.
SB 1442: Relating to 'Ohana Zones; Appropriates funds for the 'ohana zones pilot program, including expenses relating to operations.

Youth Rights & Programs:

HB 349: Relating to Children; Allows family court to include proceedings for declaration of emancipation of minors.

Trauma-Informed Care and Mental Health:

HB 948: Relating to Child and Adolescent Mental Health; Establishes a two-year child and adolescent crisis mobile outreach team pilot program on O'ahu.
SB 1044: Relating to Mental Health; Appropriates funds to hire complex-based behavioral health specialists for Hawai'i's rural public schools.
SB 712: Relating to Corrections; Appropriates moneys to support a trauma-informed certification program for adult corrections officers at Windward Community College, University of Hawai'i.

Court and Correction Center Resources:

HB 586: Relating to the Judiciary; Requires the judiciary to develop, implement, and administer an automated court appearance reminder system.
HB 823: Relating to Deaths within the Correctional System; Expands the scope of inmate deaths that are reported to the governor and legislature.

Justice Center Research:

HB 68: Relating to Criminal Justice; Appropriates funds to establish a centralized statewide criminal justice data reporting and collection system pursuant to state law.