

Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i

Senate Committee on Health and Human Services

Hearing Time: 1:00 PM, February 15, 2023

Location: State Capitol Conference Room 225

Re: SB 129, Relating to Minors

Aloha Chair San Buenaventura, Vice Chair Aquino, and members of the Committee:

On behalf of the Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i hui, we are writing with comments on SB 129, relating to minors. We are concerned that this bill may unintentionally result in fewer youth in need being served. We wish to collaborate with the legislature in addressing the needs of homeless youth and firmly believe that all children should be housed.

The current law which temporarily and explicitly allowed unlicensed facilities to shelter youth on an emergency basis will end in June if the legislature doesn't take action. The 2021 law expanded the longstanding "youth right to housing" framework, allowing minors to be sheltered on a short-term, emergency basis. The significance of providing homeless youth with emergency shelter cannot be overstated as shelter is a foundation of stability and access to essential resources, fostering positive life outcomes and mitigating the potential for future adversities. According to a recent street youth study, over three fourths of homeless youth in our state have experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. About a quarter of homeless youth reported that their reason for becoming homeless is physical abuse or parental substance abuse. For many young people, being returned immediately to their families or foster care is less than optimal, leaving them with no meaningful choice but homelessness. For children, homelessness reflects a most extreme loss of family and caretaking. We must be able to help them.

Our collective, the Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i (OYAH), works to support young people under age 25 who are disconnected from school and work, referred to as "opportunity youth." This developmental time period is extremely consequential to the individual growth and overall life chances of our children. Although SB 129 specifically pertains to minors, we also support the legislature's ongoing efforts to address the needs of opportunity youth more broadly.

The Opportunity Youth Action Hawai'i hui is a collaboration of organizations and individuals committed to reducing the harmful effects of a punitive incarceration system for youth; promoting equity in the justice system; and improving and increasing resources to address adolescent and young adult mental health needs. We seek to improve the continuity of programs and services for youth and young adults transitioning from minor to adult status; eliminate youth homelessness and housing market discrimination against young adults; and promote and fund more holistic and culturally-informed approaches among public/private agencies serving youth.