



The Senate

STATE CAPITOL
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Senate President Ronald D. Kouchi
Opening Day Remarks
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I was disappointed that we were unable to have the gallery full this morning and have friends and family on the floor. I was looking forward to drawing the energy from those in attendance to help inspire the remarks I'm offering today, but I am pleased to report to each and every one of you the energy that you brought to the floor today was invigorating. I am amazed at how ready you are to do the work that is before us and that you have found the way to seek what are our opportunities and not be stymied by the disaster that has befallen us for the last two years. I am so optimistic about what we are going to achieve together by just seeing how you carried yourself here on the floor before we even started. Now, in the Senate, I view my job as your president to help you achieve your goals, so I'm going to give a few brief remarks at the 30,000-foot level because I don't want to take away from any committee chair going into the details of the hard work that you have been putting in during the interim in preparation for this session, and I look forward in working with you as we continue to share with our state the specificity of your goals, the programs that you've been working on, and how they're going to benefit the lives of the people of Hawai'i.

The one thing that we all know is true: with all of the problems that we were trying to tackle pre-COVID, COVID has only made them worse. We were trying to deal with mental health issues, and in my district on Kaua'i, we had high per-capita suicide rates. But, in the pandemic, being cooped up, being locked down, not having social interaction and contact, stress of the inability to pay bills and support our families has only added more stress, and we need to support mental health services, and I know Chair San Buenaventura is working diligently in that area. Senator Baker, over the years, has been a champion in that area. So I look forward in working with you as we continue to address the mental health issue.

Homelessness, which was a highlighted problem, has only gotten worse and, again, with Senators San Buenaventura and Chang, we'll continue to work in this area. And I'm not going to get into the specifics of going forward, but I do want to say 'Ohana Zones work. We wound up giving latitude to partner with counties and other private organizations because the homeless situation on each island and each different region called for different solutions, and we did not have a one-fits-all, and so I look forward for us committing resources and funds to continue to address the issue.

Affordable housing: so many people now want to come to Hawai‘i and work remotely. The average cost of a home is a million dollars now, and we need to make sure that our residents have homes that they can afford. We’re incredibly concerned, as I talked with Senator Kidani, in retaining teachers; the cost of a home has been one of the major impediments to that retention. Firefighters, police officers: they’re making almost \$70,000 a year, and so we need to look at housing in the 100 to 120 percent or 140 of median just to retain our first responders, nurses, and teachers because if they can’t buy homes, then they need to compete for million-dollar houses, which are out of their reach, and I look forward to working with Senator Chang in this area.

When I look straight ahead, a recent birthday boy, Mike Gabbard—you know, there’s been many articles; we need to continue to work on the farm-to-school, farm with the hospitals, and farm-to-prisons to support our agricultural industry and have better choices, healthier options on the plates of our students and for those in our hospitals while supporting our agricultural industry.

Senator Dela Cruz has tremendous ideas about how we’re going to work for diversifying our economy. With the broadband money from the federal government, it will create opportunities, and we cannot squander this once-in-a-lifetime chance to improve the connectivity for everybody in the State of Hawai‘i, to give equal educational chances for every child here. With Senator Kidani, I’m so confident that we’ve got a great Education chair, with Senator Kim, the Higher Ed chair.

While all of those problems are important, while the Senate is concerned in raising the minimum wage, the thing that keeps me up at night is the educational or learning loss that will have a generational impact, potentially, on these young people who will not be able to achieve the goals that they dreamed about because their educational opportunity did not allow them to succeed, and they will see a lost income over their whole working career. And so we need to make sure that we can deliver that education and have college and community college and vocational avenues available for these young people to succeed.

So, those are the 30,000-foot issues. Those are some of the problems that we’re going to be dealing with. I look forward to working with you to get there. But I also want to be sure that we’re not missing some of what may seem like a small issue but are critically important. I read the article in *Civil Beat*, and they quoted Senator Acasio on the Ma‘i Movement and a bill that the Women’s Caucus—or legislation (there’s more than one bill)—in trying to get feminine hygiene products in all of our schools. Since the article appeared yesterday, I’ve received several emails, and some of them have shown me the studies where, of the people surveyed, half of the respondents have missed class because they would not go to school because they did not have the proper feminine hygiene products. And it breaks my heart to read that they’re using leaves, newspaper, and other materials. And if we work so hard to get the devices, and we work so hard to get the connectivity, and we work so hard to train and compensate the teachers fairly, it’s all lost if they’re not going to school. And so this is something that I’m going to work with the Women’s Caucus on; this is something that is important to me. And there was a seventh-grade teacher quoted in the article. She’s a teacher at Chiefess Kamakaha Middle School, which is less than 10 minutes from my house, and what struck me is the quote, “If we have to make a decision between buying food for the family or getting the right products for the teenager, then

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the food will win.” And that should not be a choice that our people have to make. We need to ensure that we’re giving them every tool to allow them to succeed.

So, I look forward, as we begin Day 1 of 60, to work with each and every one of you for the betterment of the people of the State of Hawai‘i. Thank you.