



Hawaii's Voice for a Better Future

COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Rep. John M. Mizuno, Chair  
Rep. Tom Brower, Vice Chair

COMMITTEE ON HUMAN SERVICES

Senator Suzanne Chun Oakland, Chair  
Senator Les Ihara, Jr., Vice Chair

October 14, 2009

**Re: Joint Informational Briefing October 15, 2009 to review Vocational Rehabilitation and Services for the Blind**

The notice for this hearing recognizes that “The Ho’opono program is one of the most successful programs in the country, with graduates from the program securing approximately \$20 per hour in employment wages in Hawaii (according to advocates this is the highest rate in the country).” There’s quite a bit that can be added to this success story, and good reason why Ho’opono should be spared position cuts as much as possible.

Cuts no longer make sense when they predictably will cost the state more than the salaries will save. This appears to be exactly such a situation.

It may not be generally known that Ho’opono provides evaluation and rehabilitation services to DOE graduates, many of whom have received little or no services in the public schools. For example, a student with poor vision may be given large format books which DOE has on hand instead of the option of learning and using Braille. Then, on reaching graduation age, particularly if vision had deteriorated further, the student is unable to proceed to college or to employment and it falls to Ho’opono to provide guidance, education and rehabilitation. In other words, Ho’opono steps in to do what our public schools should have done to begin with.

Ho’opono participates at transition meetings at the schools. Often, this is the first opportunity that parents will have to understand and deal with the challenges of life ahead for their students. Ideally, Ho’opono should be involved earlier than it usually is.

Certainly, if Ho’opono’s staff suffers position cuts, counselors will become overloaded and unable to work with the large number of clients who depend on them. There will be an impact on the state in that students and others who could be independent and employed will become dependent instead.

Kokua Council does not believe that the burden of budget cuts must be “shared equally,” but instead suggests that they be “**shared logically.**” Also, in times of economic crisis, the refusal of the state administration to provide at least partial relief through sensible tax increases unfairly penalizes those who depend on state-provided services. A balance of sensible cuts plus a willingness to pay for necessary services can see us through this deepening recession.

Certainly, cuts that increase costs to the state are not “logical” and should be avoided.

To the extent that your Committees are able to influence budget decisions, Kokua Council asks that decisions be made that will increase rather than decrease employment, for that is the path out of this recession.

Hawaii needs jobs. Therefore it might logically strengthen rather than damage Ho`opono and other programs that help people become employable.

Larry Geller, President

  
Kokua Council

The **Kokua Council** is one of Hawaii’s oldest advocacy groups. Kokua Council seeks to empower seniors and other concerned citizens to be effective advocates in shaping the future and well-being of our community, with particular attention to those needing help in advocating for themselves. “We embrace diversity and extend a special invitation to any senior or intergenerational minded individual interested in advocating for these important issues in Hawaii.” All are welcome. Annual membership is \$5 to defer printing and postage costs. At each meeting, topical issues are presented for discussion and possible action.

October 13, 2009

I am currently a student at Ho'opono, the vocational rehabilitation center for the blind. In the New Visions program we acquire skills in woodshop, computer, Braille, home management and mobility. All of these classes will help me in my quest to get out of my comfort zone and start living a more productive life.

In woodshop we learn to make different projects using measurement and math skills. We use power tools and in the process we build our confidence when working a project from start to finish. Our home management class enables us to cook and clean and prepares us for everyday life. It also teaches us how to budget, plan and manage our lives in a very practical way. Our mobility class takes us out on The Bus and walking on the streets of town. We learn how to obtain information so that any location is reachable. In our computer class we learn to operate the computer, type and are educated in programs such as Word, Excel, e-mail as well as accessing the Internet. We are also introduced to the different technology that is available to further our productivity. Our Braille class opens us to a world of reading and writing. We learn the Braille alphabet and start to read books. By learning how to write Braille we can now take notes, write letters, make lists and put anything in a written form.

A program like this is so valuable to the blind so that the blind can be productive contributing members of our society. We plan to contribute by working, volunteering and taking care of our families.

My understanding is that there will be position cuts in the near future and our program will be greatly impacted. I urge you to please reconsider the elimination of the Braille teacher position. To a program like this it will be like cutting off a limb Braille is so essential to the blind person. Because it is also a very time consuming challenge, any lost time for a student would be crucial. It is in pertinent that we have the continuity of our Braille lessons.

Other cuts are also slated for some of the support staff here at our school. There is a real feel of "ohana" here and every person is needed to achieve their goal of offering a quality program. Our Visions team was awarded the Human Services Team of the Year Award and this was accomplished through teamwork:

Please reconsider cutting the positions at VRSBD's Services for the Blind Branch, Hoopono.

Sincerely,

Sharon Ige

Representative John Mizuno, Chair, and Members of the House Human Services Committee

Senator Suzanne Chun Oakland, Chair, and Members of the Senate Human Services Committee

Re: Hoopono Services for the Blind Branch Joint Informational Briefing

My name is Ann Ito and I write with grave concern about the future of the Hoopono Services for the Blind Branch.

As a blind person and someone who has been privileged to have known and worked with hundreds of blind individuals especially in higher education, I strongly and respectfully urge the Hawaii State Legislature to retain four positions that appear to have been abolished and two others whose incumbents are scheduled for "reduction in force" action.

- Supervisor of counseling: essential professional leader of vital counseling unit
- Counselor: provider of essential, direct services
- Braille communication teacher: teacher of fundamental literacy skills
- Employment placement specialist: professional who provides support for mandated objective of job placement and retention
- Rehabilitation teachers (2) on neighbor islands: instructor for newly blinded, senior citizens who need services "on island"

These vital six positions along with six others slated for "RIF" action will dramatically reduce Hoopono's staffing by 35% and in critical specialty areas affecting the capacity of blind clients to acquire foundational skills of Braille and alternate media communication, self care, career planning, employment training, employment and job retention.

Hoopono is the sole, professional, comprehensive rehabilitation center for the blind in Hawaii and the Pacific as well. Hoopono needs to be adequately staffed with specialists to meet the training and employment needs of an ever increasing population of blind and visually impaired persons. We all must and will make sacrifices during these bleak times. Please help our blind community by retaining at least half of the agency positions that are in jeopardy at this time. Skilled, employed and contributing citizens are needed now more than ever before to rebuild our compromised communities. Please support Hawaii's blind persons to be in the contributing and solution side of the state's recovery efforts.

Respectfully:

Ann C. Ito

To: Members of the Human Services Committee

I am writing in regards to the proposed budget cuts regarding the school of Ho'opono. This school provides a much needed services to the blind/visually-impaired. These programs provide skills and build confidence to those deemed society's most vulnerable citizens. You state that there is a budget shortfall; however, where is your accountability in regards to the funds for these programs. As a Hawaii State Legislature, are you not in office to serve your constituents? Or have you become blinded by ambition only to have relegated the word "serve" as a nonessential issue. Sometimes I wonder if it is worth it to continue to be a tax-paying citizen since our taxes do not seem to be working for us.

Ho'opono helps those of us to become valuable members who contribute to the betterment of our society. As a result of your misguided proposals, society will experience a decline in helping those who are perceived as unable to function or help themselves. As in times passed, we may also see an increase in crime as more services are cut and people are laid off.

In other words, why do we continue to elect officials who have continually failed to address the needs of the people. As a result, government has become inept and inefficient entity that should be put out to pasture. In these difficult times, we observe the failure of government and capitalism to satisfy the masses.

Melissa Jonas  
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Address: PO Box 37846  
Honolulu, HI 96837

**From:** Virgil Stinnett [one.fisherman@hawaiiantel.net]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, October 14, 2009 3:00 PM  
**To:** HUSTestimony  
**Subject:** October 15 Briefing, Room 329 12:30 PM

September 28, 2009

Chairs Representative Mazuno and  
Senator Chun-Oakland  
Human Services Committee  
Hawaii State Capitol

TO: Chairs and All Members of Human Services Committee,

My name is Shontel Jones, I am a graduate of the New Visions Program, at Ho`opono. Before going to Ho`opono I did not know what to do with my life. I was doing all the wrong things, getting into trouble, because I was trying to hide the fact that I was blind. When I was 12 years old my doctor said that I had Stargardt's disease, it affects the central part of my vision so I see out of my peripheral. My eye sight can't be corrected, so it was hard on me growing up, because the things I had to use in school made me feel uncomfortable. Everything that I needed to use was bigger than the rest of the students so they would ask questions. I did not want to be known as the blind girl, I just wanted to be normal. I eventually dropped out of school, had a child at a young age and started to do bad things because I felt like I could not be successful because I was blind.

When I started New Visions I was scared because they said that I had to use the long white cane and sleep shades because everything we learn will be 100% blind. We use the sleep shades so that we learn how to use our other senses and the long white cane so that everyone knows that we are blind.

At first I was ashamed to use my long white cane. I got use to carrying the cane because everyone was using it so I did not feel alone. I learned how to read and write brail, cook and clean, travel in public with my long white cane, work with jaws, a computer program that enables me to work just like sighted people on the computer, and different types of technology, and also build a computer desk.

The program taught me that blindness is not a barrier to success. You can be whatever you put your mind, body, soul, and the right training into to do what you want to do.

Graduating from the New Visions Program is my first accomplishment in life.

I am currently attending Farrington High School adult education for my GED, and looking for a part time job. After I get my GED I will continue on to community college. I want to be a teacher, a counselor, working with the disabled so that I can help people like me or work with children. Now I can help my son with his homework. Thanks to the services that DVR could provide to me. I was lucky to get services then for now DVR can't provide for us because there is no money and staff are getting laid off. We need their services, assistance and the positions that will be taken from us.

Please take this letter into consideration because anyone can go blind at any time.

Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule to read my letter.

aloha and have a nice day.

Sincerely,

Shontel Jones

**From:** Virgil Stinnett [one.fisherman@hawaiiantel.net]  
**Sent:** Wednesday, October 14, 2009 2:55 PM  
**To:** HUSTestimony  
**Subject:** Briefing Room 329 October 15 at 12:30 PM

Thursday Oct first-2009

TO: Chairs Representative Mazuno and Senator Chun Oakland/ Human Services Committee Hawaii State Capitol

Subject: Save our Braille Position

My name is Finia Kachita. I am a graduate of Ho'opono New visions program. Just recently the Braille position was eliminated due to budget cuts. Braille is one of the many important skills a blind person should develop. Braille is used everyday by blind people, its one of the many ways for us to function in the world. Braille is being used at work sites, schools. There are a lot of blind people out there that don't even know Braille exists, or even if they heard of it, they don't know how to use it. That's why I strongly ask that the Braille position be restored. This would really help new coming students to Ho'opono develop the skill to read and write Braille. Not only will Braille help them function, but this will also help them to achieve goals and plans for they're future. I my self am also a Braille user, I like to read sometimes, I like to write, but most of all, this is something I will also use for work and school so I can function out there in the real world and achieve my goals and plans with the help of Braille. With out Braille, blind people wouldn't know how to read and write. It wouldn't be possible for a blind parent to have that special moment to read a bedtime story to their kids. It wouldn't be possible for a blind kid to participate in a reading and writing class activity. Most of us wouldn't be successful; few of us would take longer to get to where we need to be. Reading and writing are other ways to express your self, and to expend your mind, and your horizon. Braille is our way of reading and writing. Please restore the Braille position.

Respectfully yours

Finia Kachita

Good afternoon. My name is chena Lee Pauole. I'm from the island of Maui. I attend Ho'opono New Visions Program. I am legally blind. I have been in this program for a month and a half and want to express how Hoopono has begun to give me life skills so that I may succeed and most of all be independent.

Currently I am taking five classes which consists of Woodshop, Personal Home Management, Computer, Braille and last but not least, mobility. We take these classes to build our confidence so that after completion we are ready to contribute to society. Before coming to Hoopono I struggled with my vision loss and felt totally dependent on my family and friends. Just being in this program a short time I am compelled to speak out because it is such a life changing experience for me and I know I speak for many of the students.



BRANDON G. YOUNG

980 Maunawili Rd.

Kailua HI 96734

October 12, 2009

Dear Senators and Representatives,

My name is Brandon Young and I have been involved in the Ho`opono Services for the Blind Branch (SBB) since i was in middle school. I first visited the center when I was a small child and recently diagnosed with my blindness. The center did not provide much hope, but I still was determined to live a quality life. My next encounter with Ho`opono was when I became a client after graduating high school. The funds From Ho`opono allowed me to obtain an bachelor's degree from the University of Hawaii at Manoa. I then went on and received quality training similar to the skills that are taught at the New Vision's program at Ho`opono. I am now aspiring to be a rehabilitation counselor. The reason why I am aspiring to be a rehabilitation counselor is to create many more oppurtunities for those who are disabled in Hawaii. There is still much work to be done and with your help much progress can be achieved. I am testifying in support of keeping these positions intact to allow blind people the ability to read and write and to achieve good jobs.

The Ho`opono Services for the Blind Branch is the vehicle that services the blind under the Vocational Rehabilitation program in Hawaii. VRS services allows blind people to gain independence through training in the New Visions program and provides them oppurtunities to receive employment through education and other training. Graduates from the New Visions program receive employment in positive jobs and make good salaries. Programs that are effected by the budget cuts involve not only the New Visions program, but the Vending program and all other programs that the Services for the Blind Branch (SBB) covers. The elimination of these 6 crucial positions would severely hurt the possibilities that have been established.

Sincerely Yours

Brandon G. Young