JOSH GREEN, M.D.
GOVERNOR OF HAWAI'I

TIA L.R. HARTSOCK, MSW, MSCJA
DIRECTOR OF OFFICE AND RESILIENCE

STATE OF HAWAII
OFFICE OF WELLNESS AND RESILIENCE
KE KE'ENA KŪPA'A MAULI OLA
OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
415 S.BERETANIA ST. #415
HONOLULU, HAWAII 96813

December 30, 2024

The Honorable Ronald D. Kouchi,
President of the Senate,
and Members of the Senate
Thirty-Second State Legislature
State Capitol, Room 409
Honolulu, HI 96813

The Honorable Nadine K. Nakamura
Speaker, and Members of the
House of Representatives
Thirty-Second State Legislature
State Capitol, Room 431
Honolulu, HI 96813

Dear President Kouchi, Speaker Nakamura, and Members of the Legislature:

Pursuant to Act 86 of Session Laws 2023, Relating to the Child Welfare Services, signed into law by Governor Josh Green, M.D., on June 14, 2023, the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group, via the Office of Wellness and Resilience, submits its report to the legislature as required by this law.

In accordance with Section 93-16, Hawai'i Revised Statutes, the report may also be viewed electronically at https://owr.hawaii.gov/reports/ and https://www.malamaohana.net.

Should you have questions about this report, please contact us at (808) 586-0805 or by email at gov.owr@hawaii.gov.

Mālama pono,

Tia L. R. Hartsock, Director
Office of Wellness and Resilience

Enclosure: Mālama 'Ohana Working Group 2024 Report

c: Office of the Governor; Office of the Lt. Governor; Office of the Auditor; Dept. of Budget and Finance; Hawai'i State Library System: State Publications Distribution Center & Hawai'i Documents Center; Legislative Reference Bureau Library; University of Hawai'i at Mānoa—Hamilton Library, Serials Department

MĀLAMA ʻOHANA WORKING GROUP

pilina

HAWAIʻI STATE OFFICE OF WELLNESS AND RESILIENCE (OWR)

malamaohana.net

Report to the Legislature of the State of Hawai'i: Findings and recommendations of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group, created by SB 295 SD2 HD2 CD1, enacted as Act 86 on June 14, 2023.

To the memory of Ariel Sellers, who inspired us to design the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group. And to Kānaka ʻŌiwi; the keiki of Hawaiʻi from past, present, and future generations; those who shared their stories and a part of themselves; and those who listened with compassion.

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I. Letters from the Co-chairs

Aloha mai kākou,

The completion of this report by the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group marks not just the conclusion of a legislative mandate under Act 186, but a pivotal step forward in reshaping Hawaiʻi's child welfare and family support systems. Grounded in the values of mālama (to care for) and ʻohana (family), this work has sought to bring about a future where every child in Hawaiʻi has the opportunity to thrive, and every family is supported in maintaining their wholeness, dignity, and cultural identity.

The journey to this moment has been one of deep reflection, collaboration, and action. It has required us to confront systemic challenges and inequities, particularly the overrepresentation of Native Hawaiian children in the child welfare system.

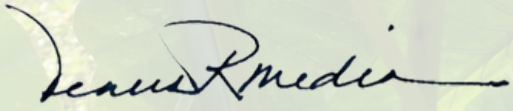
We know it was not always this way. Through imperialism and colonization, traditional practices of caring for ʻohana and keiki were weakened and replaced with Western systems, which were conceptually and structurally inconsistent with Hawaiian culture, and led to the overrepresentation of Native Hawaiians in the child welfare system. The responsibility of ensuring the welfare of keiki was the kuleana of the ʻohana and community, not the government.

This report is more than a collection of recommendations. It is a shared vision for a better Hawaiʻi, one that places the well-being of keiki and ʻohana at the center of our collective kuleana (responsibility). It has called on us to embrace trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches, ensuring that solutions honor the unique history, values, and resilience of our community. It is a testament to the power of partnership among lawmakers, service providers, cultural practitioners, and, most importantly, the families whose voices and experiences have shaped this work.

As we move forward, we are reminded that the true measure of success lies not in the pages of this report, but in the lives we touch and the systems we transform. Let this document be a beacon of hope and a call to action for everyone committed to ensuring that all families in Hawaiʻi are supported, uplifted, and empowered.

Mahalo nui loa to my brilliant co-chair, Laurie Tochiki, the dedicated volunteer members and support staff of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group, the remarkable facilitators from One Shared Future, our passionate community stakeholders, and to all who have walked this path with us. Together, we can create a future where the values of mālama and aloha guide every decision we make for Hawaiʻi's keiki and ʻohana.

Me ke aloha pumehana,



Venus Kauʻiokawēkiu Rosete-Medeiros, Co-chair

I. Letters from the Co-chairs

Aloha mai kākou,

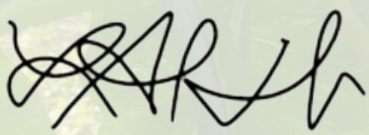
Since September 2023, the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group has listened with open minds and open hearts to the stories of our youth, children, parents, family, and community about the child welfare system. And now our hearts are heavy with a moral and sacred responsibility to share what we have heard and lift a cry for urgent action. But we also know, based upon the wisdom of the voices of lived experience that shared so generously with us, that the action needs to be thoughtful and thorough. We do not need reactionary responses. As one community member said, we need real change to heal the deep wounds, not band aids. Another community member pointed out that both snakes and butterflies transform - but a snake just sheds its skin, whereas the caterpillar completely transforms into a beautiful butterfly.

The idea of the working group began at an April 2022 convening of the Nā Kama a Hāloa network. The legislature was trying to find solutions to problems with child welfare services, in the wake of the death of Ariel Sellers in Waimānalo. Legislators and state administration did not agree about what those solutions should be. Venus Rosete-Medeiros came to the convening determined to bring the voices of lived experience together with the strengths of the community to shed light on the problems and the solutions.

The stories and the ideas that we uplift in this report should not be dismissed. We cannot become distracted by finger pointing. There have been many reports over the years and many studies. And yet, problems persist. Perhaps it is naïve to believe that this report will be different. The recommendations we make require resources, relationships, and a recommitment to the values of ʻohana and aloha. It is time to concentrate our efforts and resources to mālama ʻohana.

I have worked in the child welfare system in various roles since 1980. It has been an honor to serve as Co-Chair of this working group with Venus. The members of the working group are incredible warriors for thriving children and families. We also encountered other warriors, not named as members of the working group, but equally important to our work. As we traveled around the state together for the listening sessions, we also formed a sense of collaborative community with one another that we hope will continue to grow and expand, formally or informally, to accomplish the goals of this report.

Mahalo,



Laurie Arial Tochiki, JD, PhD

II. Executive Summary: Mālama ʻOhana

Mālama ʻOhana

In many cultures around the world, neighbors greet one another with the question,

"How are the children?"

Pehea nā keiki?

For fifteen months, seventeen Mālama ʻOhana Working Group members representing youth and families throughout the state, together with hundreds of community members, opened their hearts and listened deeply to the stories of lived experience in the child welfare system. We asked hundreds of people in Hawaiʻi, "How are the children?" There is wisdom in our families and youth. Our report begs those who read it to listen and act. The action requested is to redesign our child welfare system, and to mālama ʻohana.

A. Our Mandate and Approach

Established by the 2023 Hawaiʻi State Legislature, the working group was asked to develop recommendations to establish a child welfare system that is trauma-informed, sustains a community-based partnership, and responds to the needs of children and families in the system and the community.

Our first task was to establish an approach to our work by cultivating and modeling the kind of listening and concern that we needed for our working group and modeling the type of child welfare system we hope for. The result was a statement called a "designed alliance."

From there, our work unfolded in phases. We began with the intense work of interviewing individuals, conducting conversations, and holding group discussions in Permitted Interaction Groups, which helped shape our initial understanding. We then conducted eleven community listening sessions throughout the state, gathering stories and ideas from each community we visited.

OUR PROCESS FOCUSED ON THREE ESSENTIAL STEPS:

1. Establishing partnerships and relationships
2. Listening to the voices of lived experience in the community
3. Bringing those voices together to create a vision.

This Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Report to the Legislature is the culmination of that work.

B. Defining the Child Welfare System

Photo Credit: One Shared Future

The "child welfare system" is broad and ill-defined. Child Welfare Services (CWS) is an agency, not a system. In Hawai'i, CWS is the branch of the Department of Human Services (DHS) responsible for the protection, care, and permanency of abused and neglected children. The broader child welfare system includes CWS, family courts, the Department of the Attorney General, law enforcement officers, and nonprofit service providers. It intersects with the education system, criminal justice system, healthcare systems, crisis response systems, and many other systems.

In all our community meetings and working group meetings, we emphasized that our hope is for shared kuleana (responsibility) in the child welfare system for our families and children.

In this report, "child welfare system" refers to the broader system, while "CWS" refers to the state agency.

Photo Credit: One Shared Future

C. System Assessment: What We Learned

Our statewide listening sessions focused on understanding the child welfare system through the experiences of those it touches—from families and children to workers and community partners.

We sought to uncover both strengths and challenges by exploring three fundamental questions:

- ***What are the strengths of the child welfare system?***
- ***What are the needs of the families and children in the child welfare system?***
- ***What is your vision or hope for the child welfare system?***

There are good people doing difficult work throughout the system, but altogether, the system is failing

The system's strengths lie in individuals within CWS, community-based organizations, churches, schools, and families who provide help and hope. However, as a *system*, few strengths were articulated. People inside and outside of CWS describe an uncoordinated system that works in silos and lacks proper resources and accountability. In short, they described a system that hurts instead of helps. Everywhere we went, we heard stories of children being harmed by the very system meant to protect them. We found deep mistrust within the child welfare system, alienated relationships, and strained partnerships.

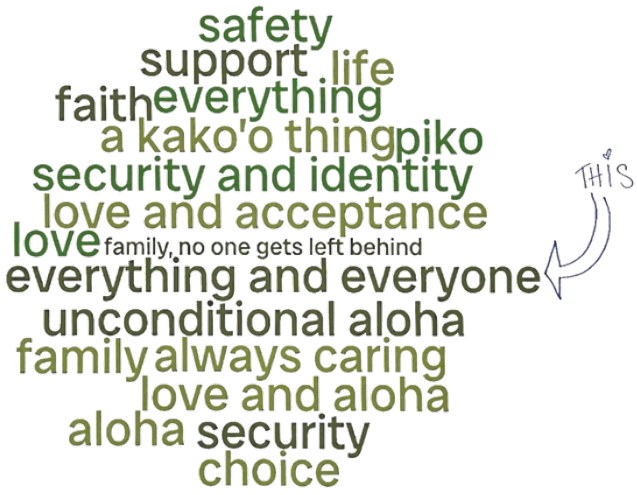
Community members and those with lived experience want accessible, trauma-responsive, specialized supports when families struggle. When CWS responds, affected children and families want a system that is respectful, responsive, transparent, efficient, and effective. They desire a well-funded, well-staffed system with services and procedures that meet high operational standards.

What we found is that this desired system does not exist. While valiant warriors and individuals with big hearts exist, the problems loom large and formidable. People throughout the state are frustrated.

We heard countless stories of anguish. Many were harmed by CWS caseworkers' inadequate training and knowledge. A common theme was the complexity of understanding family dynamics when child abuse and neglect intersect with domestic violence. The dynamics of power and control can lead decision-makers to make grave, even fatal, errors. Another recurring issue was the cascading impact of poverty and the need for concrete supports to prevent CWS involvement.

The CWS workforce itself is struggling. Some units face chronic vacancies due to constant staff turnover. Many workers lack the knowledge, skills, and tools needed to do their jobs effectively. While pay differentials and overtime help, and new programs and innovations are beneficial, the *infrastructure* of CWS and supporting agencies—such as the Departments of the Attorney General, Accounting and General Services, and Human Resources Development —makes implementation painfully slow.

Some recent system changes show promise. For example, the number of children removed from their families dropped significantly in 2023-24. However, we found no evidence that effective and sufficient services were provided to those families diverted from CWS.



Graphic Credits: Good Juju Co.

Graphic Credits: Good Juju Co. for One Shared Future

D. Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Recommendations

Transforming Hawaiʻi's child welfare system requires deep, systemic change across three levels:

- **Commitment, values, and mindset**: The foundations of our work
- **Policies, laws, and resources:** The fundamental structures that govern our system
- **Practice and relationships:** How we work with and support families and system partners

This transformation must rest on three foundational elements:

1. A system grounded in traditional Hawaiian values
2. A trauma-informed and culturally responsive approach
3. Excellent workforce, sustainable funding and modern data systems

Recommendation 1:
Address Historical Trauma and Persistent Disproportionality

System Critique:

State and social services systems, particularly those involving CWS, lack adequate awareness of historical contributors to current situations and appropriate trauma-informed responses to both historical and present trauma.

Full Recommendation:

Acknowledge and address historical and present conditions and barriers that perpetuate the overrepresentation of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Island people in categories of need or distress.

Path Forward:

- Ground child welfare work in the values and culture of Hawaiʻi.
- Incorporate traditional Hawaiian practices into the system.
- Support collaborative innovation with the Office of Hawaiian Affairs and Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander organizations.
- Provide comprehensive cultural competency training.
- Improve outcomes for all families through culturally responsive approaches.

Recommendation 2:
Build Family Resilience

System Critique:

Hawaiʻi has a shortage of resources dedicated to prevention, especially primary prevention and universal supports. Many struggling individuals are unaware of available services or how to access them.

Full Recommendation:

Prioritize thriving families above all other commitments by providing universal family supports aimed at ensuring a stable foundation and opportunities for growth.

Path Forward:

- Shift our mindset and value to prioritize "mandatory supporting."
- Create accessible pathways to concrete supports like food and shelter.
- Establish community-based resource centers (Ka Piko) staffed by individuals with lived experience.
- Meet families' basic needs for housing, childcare, and physical and mental healthcare.
- Expand Family First Hawaiʻi services.

Recommendation 3:
Provide Comprehensive Specialized Support Services

System Critique:

Seeking help for substance use disorders, mental health issues, domestic violence, and even basic supports feels too risky due to mistrust of systems and fear of CWS involvement. The process of accessing these services is often overly complicated.

Full Recommendation:

Provide accessible, trauma-responsive, specialized supports and interventions outside the child welfare system for parents facing intense challenges.

Path Forward:

- Create accessible pathways to services that minimize the risk of family separation when parents are facing challenges or crises such as:
  - Severe poverty
  - Substance use disorders
  - Domestic violence
  - Serious mental and physical health conditions.
- Enhance CWS workers' abilities to properly understand and address these issues and support families with a trauma-responsive and culturally informed approach.

Photo Credit: Ki'i Kalo Photography

Photo Credit: Ki'i Kalo Photography

Recommendation 4:
Develop a Trauma-Informed System

System Critique:

Families involved with CWS find it challenging to navigate the complicated system and related services. The experience often feels adversarial, confusing, secretive, and isolating for both children and parents, causing further trauma.

Full Recommendation:

When CWS intervenes in a family, ensure that the intervention is respectful and supportive, minimizes trauma, and does not create more harm than the original issue they hoped to address.

Path Forward:

- Create a comprehensive trauma-informed culture throughout CWS.
- Build expertise in trauma-informed care and cultural competence throughout the child welfare system from front-line staff to top leaders, including in CWS, courts, and service providers.
- Transform policies and procedures to prioritize family support and communications.
- Address secondary trauma among helping professionals.

Recommendation 5: Build Excellence Through Accountability

System Critique:

The child welfare system and related systems are not user-friendly for staff or families, lack sufficient accountability measures, and suffer from fragmentation and isolation between different components.

Full Recommendation:

Ensure that systems, services, processes, and procedures are coordinated, accountable, and efficient with robust oversight, adequate funding, appropriate staffing, and high operational standards

.

Path Forward:

- Improve core CWS processes, staffing, training, supervision, data systems, and technology.
- Ensure a commitment to excellence from the legislature, the Governor and Lt. Governor, and the DHS Director.
- Prioritize supporting the child welfare system through the Departments of the Attorney General, Accounting and General Services, and Human Resources Development office.
- Maximize state and federal resources and eliminate waste.
- Establish independent oversight mechanisms, such as an independent ombudsperson, Child Advocate, or grievance office.
- Create robust advocacy systems for children, parents, and families.

E. A Vision for System Transformation

Our recommendations aim to create an integrated system where families are truly at the center, supported by coordinated services and strong institutional frameworks. The following illustration shows how the interconnected and essential elements of the transformed system work together:

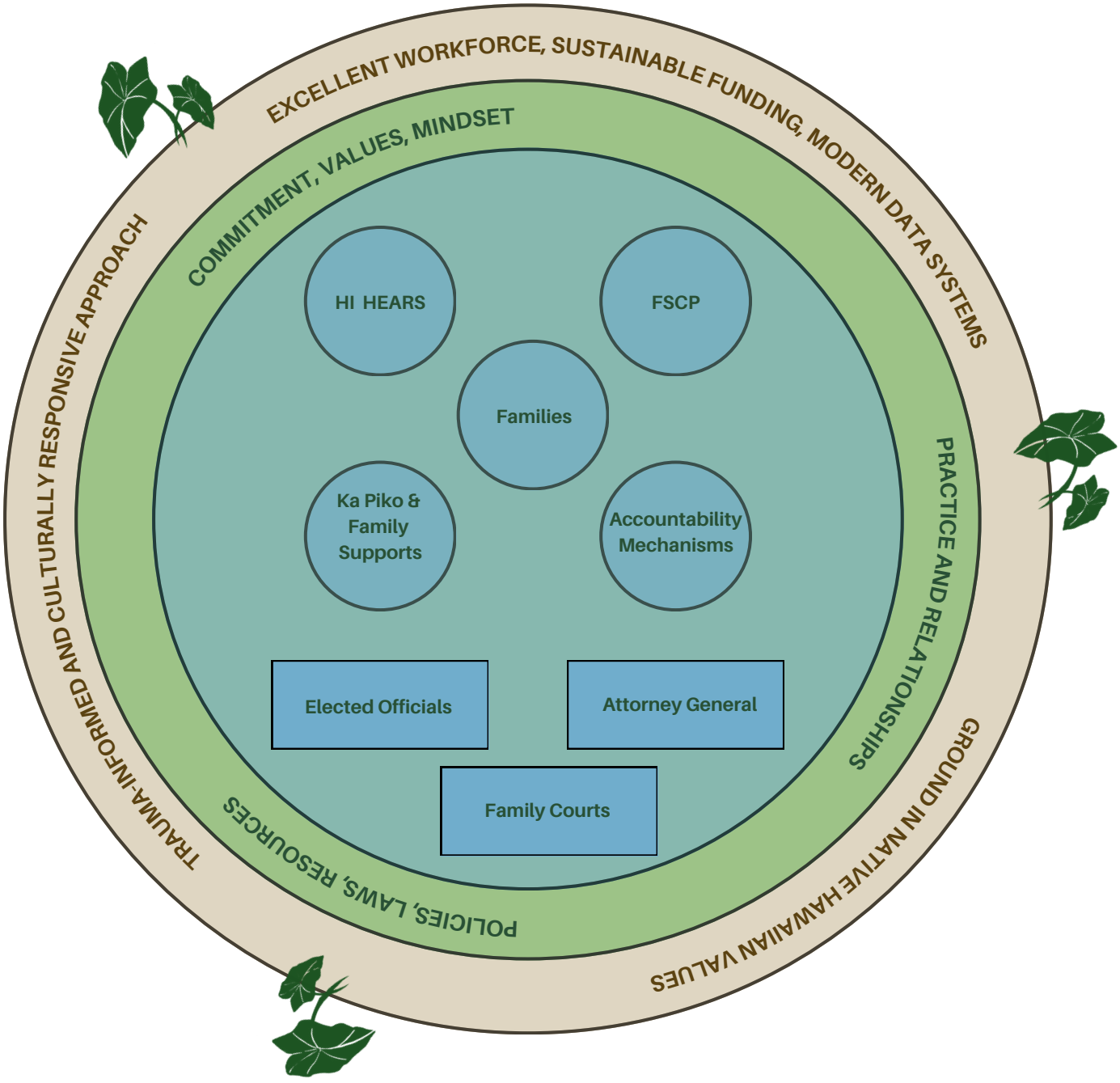


Figure A: A Reimagined Family Support System for Hawai'i

This vision places families at the center, surrounded by key support services and accountability mechanisms, all operating within a framework of commitment, values, and mindset. The outer ring represents the essential foundational elements needed to sustain this transformation: a culturally responsive approach, grounded in Native Hawaiian values, supported by an excellent workforce, sustainable funding, and modern data systems.

F. Moving Forward: A Call to Action

We present a powerful vision for transforming how Hawai'i supports families and protects children. This transformation demands commitment, oversight, resources, and collaboration from all stakeholders. While creating lasting change requires perseverance, families need our help *now*—we must act with both urgency and sustained dedication.

A New Implementation Approach

The scale and urgency of needed changes requires leadership from outside existing system structures. While DHS and CWS must be central players in this transformation, they cannot lead it. They are already struggling with resource and capacity constraints at every level—from funding and staffing shortages to overwhelming workloads—while preparing for a federal review and managing multiple initiatives. To succeed, this transformation needs dedicated external leadership that can drive systemic change while supporting DHS and CWS through their critical internal changes.

We ask our elected officials to allocate funds, political capital, and public resources to implementing this vision of a transformed system.

Photo Credit: Ki'i Kalo Photography

WILL YOU COMMIT TO THIS?

Building the Path Forward

Our vision outlines a new way of supporting families. Turning this vision into reality requires detailed planning and coordinated execution. To maintain momentum and ensure success, we must create a permanent mechanism to continue the Mālama 'Ohana work.

The Office of Wellness and Resilience is uniquely positioned to convene and connect the network necessary to drive this transformation through:

- Amplifying community voices by continuously listening to and uplifting the wisdom of those with lived expertise.
- Building partnerships through ongoing collaboration with parents, youth, caregivers, service providers, and state agencies.
- Driving change by convening implementation teams to execute recommendations and concrete action steps.
- Deepening understanding through research teams that further develop the vision's core concepts.
- Ensuring accountability through a design and tracking team that will:
  - Map the sequence of steps toward transformation.
  - Develop comprehensive budgets and funding requests.
  - Monitor and report on progress.

The Path Forward Requires Action

We have fulfilled our mandate to "develop recommendations to establish a child welfare system that is trauma-informed, sustains a community-based partnership, and responds to the needs of children and families in the system and the community." Now we call on our elected officials to fulfill their part by supporting and funding the implementation of "transformative changes to the State's existing child welfare system."

Children and families who have experienced our broken child welfare system told us what needs to change.

WILL YOU COMMIT TO HELPING US MAKE THOSE CHANGES?

III. Mālama ʻOhana: Caring for, nurturing, and protecting our families

The primary task of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group was to create a safe environment and process where we could listen, witness, and report. We had a legislative purpose and stated goals, but our task, our work, and our commitment was to hear the experiences of people in our communities. Our communities continue to grieve over the trauma experienced by those children and families touched by the child welfare system, especially those who died after their involvement. Shame and regret were in every conversation. But the strongest feelings were hope and resilience.

The working group hopes that our efforts have contributed to easing pain and promoting healing.
We seek to shift the burden of shame from individuals to a shared kuleana, the responsibility of all of us, especially our elected officials. It is we, collectively, who create and fund systems. Through our decisions, we create the conditions that determine whether children and parents struggle or thrive.

Photo Credit: Kiʻi Kalo Photography

A. History

The Mālama ʻOhana Working Group fully came into being on June 14, 2023, when Act 86 was signed into law by Governor Josh Green, signifying the state's commitment to uplift the voices of 'ohana and keiki affected by the child welfare system. The origins of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group, however, go back to 2018, if not earlier. September 2018 was the first convening of Nā Kama a Hāloa, a community-based network striving to weave Native Hawaiian wisdom and perspective into the Hawaiʻi foster care system and improve outcomes for Native Hawaiian children and families involved in the child welfare system. The Dream of the network is:

We have reimagined and transformed child welfare so that it is grounded in Native Hawaiian culture and values and is sustained in deep positive relationships that heal and strengthen ourselves, our ʻohana, and our communities.

The Network's goal is that "by the year 2030, Native Hawaiian children are no longer disproportionately represented in child welfare."

Nā Kama a Hāloa came together to better understand the consistently disproportionate representation of Native Hawaiian children in the child welfare system and to eliminate that disparity. Prior to 2018, 50% of children in foster care were Native Hawaiian.

In SFY 2022, 44% of children in foster care were Native Hawaiian and 39% of confirmed child maltreatment victims were Native Hawaiian. Native Hawaiian children comprise 33% of children in Hawaiʻi.[1]

Not only are Native Hawaiian children overrepresented in the child welfare system, but their families are also overrepresented in categories and systems contributing to child welfare system involvement, including poverty, poor health outcomes, homelessness, the juvenile and criminal justice systems, public benefits, public housing, and more.

This was not always the case. Understanding the historical causal factors associated with Native Hawaiians' overrepresentation in the child welfare system, along with recognizing the benefits of traditional Native Hawaiian social structures and practices, provide insights for addressing this disproportionality.

Prior to sustained Western contact, kānaka ʻōiwi (Native Hawaiians) thrived in kauhale (community of homes) with strong ʻohana (extended family) systems, lōkahi (harmony), and the ahupuaʻa (land division for stewardship of the ʻāina, or land).

They had developed a set of practices, social structure, and systems of governance to mālama keiki. "Traditionally, ʻohana was the center of Hawaiian society, and the keiki (children) were at the heart of the ʻohana (*A Call to Action for Healing* - See Appendix G). "

"The people within the kauhale, or community, shared the responsibilities of caring for and nurturing its keiki. This kuleana, or responsibility and privilege, was collectively shared by everyone. The responsibility of ensuring the welfare of keiki was never meant to rest solely on the government and keiki were certainly not intended to be removed from their ʻohana without a shared decision about where the keiki would reside. The overall well-being of the keiki was always at the center of any decision made concerning the keiki. Traditional practices of hanai and luhi (adoption or temporary care) were not seen as punitive or demeaning but as means to provide comfort and reassurance that the keiki would be in a safe, nurturing, and caring environment" (Act 86).

[1] American Community Survey 2021 1-Year Estimates.

Colonization, the decimation of the population through disease, the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, and the outlawing of Hawaiian language, culture, and healing practices were cumulative systemic injuries to Native Hawaiians and the ʻāina (land).

"Disconnection from land, the impoverishment of many, and the loss of language and cultural practices cut off many kānaka ʻōiwi from their culture, spirituality and self-determination"
(A Call to Action for Healing).

The resulting trauma continues to be passed to subsequent generations. Traditional practices of caring for ʻohana and keiki were weakened and replaced with Western systems, which were conceptually and structurally inconsistent with Hawaiian culture, leading to the overrepresentation of Native Hawaiians in the child welfare system. Furthermore, Hawaiian cultural practices which benefit keiki and ʻohana and could reduce disparities remain under-utilized or under-recognized by larger systems of authority.

In their statement, *A Call to Action for Healing*, Nā Kama a Hāloa, the network that birthed the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group, says,

"When we recognize the contexts of colonization, of historical trauma, and of the differences between the kānaka ʻōiwi collectivist culture and the Western individualistic culture that grounds American child welfare, we understand that we can and must do better to serve ʻohana and keiki."

Nā Kama a Hāloa's recognition of how "American child welfare practices and policies have harmed and contributed to the disruption of kānaka ʻōiwi ʻohana" and community criticisms of child welfare that were shared in their April 2022 network session led to the conceptualization of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group. Nā Kama network participants saw a need to expand the scope of their work to reimagine and transform child welfare for all children and families. Grounding the child welfare system in Native Hawaiian culture and values, which place children at the heart of families and families at the center of society, benefits us all.

The expansion of Nā Kama a Hāloa's scope of work was embodied in legislation to create the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group. The original design of the working group began just a few weeks after the disappearance of Ariel Sellers in Waimanalo. The network knew that they had to step forward and that too many children had died. The first bill, introduced in the 2022 legislative session, did not ultimately pass, for reasons unrelated to the substance of the Mālama ʻOhana proposal. SB 295, which passed in 2023, established the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group within the Hawaiʻi Office of Wellness and Resilience to

"seek, design, and recommend transformative changes to the State's existing child welfare system." The working group would "hold listening sessions throughout the state and bring community partners together to improve and transform the child welfare system. Uplifting the voices of youth and parents with lived experience, building collaboration between community and state, and deep listening are critical components for authentic transformation in our approach to support some of our most vulnerable families and children"

(https://www.malamaohana.net/malama-ohana-working-group).

B. Purpose, Process, and Outcomes

Purpose

Act 86 established, "within the Office of Wellness and Resilience, the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group to seek, design, and recommend transformative changes to the State's existing child welfare system."[2] Act 86 included a list of constituencies for the working group, including former foster youth, birth parents, licensed resource caregivers, kinship resource caregivers, Child Welfare Services, and Native Hawaiian organizations. The working group's activities were governed by the Hawaii Sunshine Law, Haw. Rev. Stat. § 92-1 et seq.

Process

The working group used a community-based participatory research approach to collecting and analyzing qualitative research data from which it made recommendations. Community members with lived experience within the child welfare system and people working within the system in various capacities developed the scope of the research, questions to be pursued, and methods of information gathering. They participated in gathering the information, analyzing the data, and formulating recommendations. The entire process was facilitated and co-created by One Shared Future (https://www.onesharedfuture.com/).

One strength of the process was the diversity of experiences and perspectives informing the findings and recommendations. This diversity provided an opportunity to model the kind of collaborative, solution-focused process we want to see in our child welfare system. We developed a statement of intent and values to guide our interactions, our "designed alliance," which was read and affirmed at every meeting.

The appendices include more information about the process and methods, including lists of the participants and links to data that was collected.

Outcomes

This report synthesizes the information collected through this process into a vision for thriving keiki and ʻohana, with recommendations for how our vision can successfully be implemented. In Section IV, we begin with a summary of community members' strongest aspirations, their critiques of the system, and the five recommendations of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group. Section V presents what was learned during the process. This section, *Insights and Experiences from Our Communities*, presents subjective perspectives and experiences that collectively provide a picture of our child welfare system as seen by youth who were in foster care, birth parents, relatives, resource caregivers, faith community members, individuals around the state, and people who work with families through private and state agencies, including CWS. Section VI, *Our Shared Vision of How We Can Mālama ʻOhana*, synthesizes "what we heard" into "what we can envision"—it presents strategies for meeting the needs uplifted in Section V and implementing the recommendations. These two sections help us to be true to our purpose, which is to both uplift the voices of youth and parents with lived experience, and to design transformative changes to the child welfare system.

[2] Act 86, Hawai'i Session Laws 2023.

Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Designed Alliance

To create a shared, safe space where we can interact and generate meaningful ideas and recommendations, we agree to stay engaged in the following ways:

- **Commit** to achieving our Working Group's goals
- **Live our values** of honesty, respect, inclusion, aloha, empathy, equity of voice, value of lived experience, and haʻahaʻa (humility), and kindness
- **Assume good intent**, listen deeply, seek first to understand, focus on solutions, avoid blame, and take responsibility
- **Nurture** a trauma-informed, growth mindset, and positive culture of safety, respect, confidentiality, boundary respect, hope, curiosity, learning, and transformation
- **Respect** others' experiences in how they are sharing, stay out of judgment, and look to ʻike kūpuna (ancestral knowledge) as a source of guidance
- **Support each other** in being bold and courageous, vulnerable, honest, heard, mindful, intentional, empowered, comfortable and uncomfortable, stretched, and mākaukau (ready)
- **Cultivate aloha** for one another and connectedness to each other and our communities

www.malamaohana.net

Affirmed on 10/16/23

Figure: The "Designed Alliance" – A collaboratively developed statement of intent and shared values that guided our interactions. This document was read and reaffirmed at the start of every meeting to ensure clarity, alignment, and mutual respect.

C. Acknowledging Complexities

The "child welfare system" is broad and ill-defined. Child Welfare Services (CWS) is an agency, not a system. In Hawai'i, Child Welfare Services (CWS) is the branch of the Department of Human Services (DHS) responsible for the protection, care, and permanency of abused and neglected children. The broader child welfare system includes CWS, family courts, law enforcement officers, and nonprofit service providers. It intersects with the education system, criminal justice system, healthcare systems, crisis response systems, and many other systems. In all our community meetings and working group meetings we emphasized that our hope is for shared kuleana in the "child welfare system" for our families and children. In this report, "child welfare system" refers to the broader system, while "CWS" refers to the state agency.

Act 86, the preceding work of Nā Kama a Hāloa, and the evidence gathered through the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group process confirm that our modern child welfare system is structurally inconsistent with the cultural history and current needs of families and communities in Hawai'i. This disconnect stems from the system's foundation in federal mandates and funding streams, which often conflict with Native Hawaiian values and culture and those of many other Hawai'i residents. For instance, federal child welfare system concepts such as foster care and adoption stand in stark contrast to Native Hawaiian practices such as hānai and luhi (adoption or temporary care). Furthermore, the current system's emphasis on removal of children, family surveillance or "policing" diverges significantly from traditional cultural approaches to child welfare in many of Hawai'i's diverse communities.

This federally constructed child welfare system structure inherently incorporates biases related to class and race, reflecting a historical context rooted in white supremacy and colonial perspectives that often prioritize Western, middle-class values over other cultural norms and practices. For instance, the federal system was originally designed to remove children and place them in institutions and foster homes, and the system was not designed to include extended family. Although these concepts have changed over time, the essential structure remains.

In addition to failing families, the current system structure is detrimental to its own workforce. Chronic staff vacancies and overwhelming caseloads strain existing employees while competing mandates create confusion and stress. The lack of adequate training, technology, and support, coupled with insufficient pay relative to the emotional intensity and workload (and similar positions in other workspaces), leads to high burnout and attrition rates. This unsustainable situation not only compromises the well-being of system employees but also severely impacts their ability to effectively serve families in need and the safety of the children they are charged with protecting.

Despite these challenges, Hawai'i needs federal funding to provide desired services for families. Furthermore, community members emphasized that children must be protected from physical and sexual abuse, and to the extent possible, protected from the repercussions of adult interpersonal violence, substance abuse, and illegal activities.

Communities were also clear, however, that they do not want a family surveillance system where families are policed and reported for poverty, a lack of parenting knowledge, or struggles with health disorders such as depression or addiction. Instead, they want a community where parents can get what they need to be healthy and provide a safe, nurturing environment for their keiki.

The Mālama ʻOhana Working Group recognizes the following tensions inherent in our child welfare system and efforts to improve it:

- Leverage federal funding while minimizing the impact of federal mandates.
- Balance the use of effective cultural practices and local solutions with the requirement to implement evidence-based services for funding compliance.
- Protect children effectively with minimal intrusion, ensuring interventions improve rather than exacerbate situations.
- Support parents without undue surveillance, punitive measures, or penalties for seeking help.
- Lack of staffing and accountability has led to inadequate supervision and support for children placed in foster care, guardianship, and adoption.
- Improve a system with a workforce too overextended to implement recommendations.

Alongside these tensions is the absence of an existing blueprint for what Hawaiʻi wants and needs.

"The fundamental problem is that no one really knows what a fully functioning, trauma-informed child welfare system looks like – it's never happened before. There is no instruction manual for creating a complex adaptive living system because it is not like assembling a machine. Every organization emerges out of the combination of people who comprise it within the constraints of its environment and it cannot entirely be predicted. The lists of 'do's and don'ts' that now exist about trauma-informed care are good as guidelines but so much has to do with our shared intention and our shared vision about what we want to see emerge out of these efforts. That is where any child welfare organization needs to begin – with a vision of what they want to become."[3]

Acknowledging that we are working in uncharted territory, we reflected on what was shared with us and asked, "In light of what we've heard, what if…?" We pondered what we would have if we were to replace our existing child welfare system. Yet, even in this uncharted territory we were reminded that our traditional cultural practices and values provide a compelling and promising framework for the kind of family support system we envision. In response, we started to articulate a vision of how we could mālama ʻohana by implementing the recommendations we heard to address the needs expressed.

[3] Middleton, J. S., Bloom, S. L., Strolin-Goltzman, J., & Caringi, J. (2019). Trauma-informed care and the public child welfare system: the challenges of shifting paradigms: introduction to the special issue on trauma-informed care. Journal of Public Child Welfare, 13(3), 235–244. https://doi.org/10.1080/15548732.2019.1603602

D. A Way Forward

The crushing complexity of the current system requires strong leadership committed to implementing courageous change. This kind of innovative leadership, skilled in implementation science, and supported by resources and shared vision, is essential to the kind of change that the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group envisions.

This Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Report represents a first step. Hawaiʻi's ʻohana are asking the legislature to take a second step by pledging its commitment to this work and allocating funding for this critical work to continue. Without a second step, the legislature's purpose for passing Act 86, "to improve the State's child welfare system," will not be achieved.

Based on your charge to us in Act 86, the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group worked tirelessly to collaborate with the state, the community, and stakeholders "to determine where the core infrastructure is failing." This report provides a vision for "improving outcomes for all children and families in the state's child welfare system." Only with the state's financial support and sustained political support will this vision become reality. We have laid the foundation for "more effective community support and more community responsibility for the well-being and welfare of children."

Photo Credit: Kiʻi Kalo Photography

We have learned from past efforts to transform the Hawaiʻi child welfare system—without sustained funding and commitment, little progress is made. In 1994, the Hawaiʻi legislature created a Child Welfare Services Reform Task Force to develop a "blueprint for reform in child protective services." The Task Force of 49 members met for 18 months, held 16 focus groups around the state, divided into 9 working groups, involved nearly 500 people, and was funded by local and national foundations and businesses.

In 1996, the Task Force presented a comprehensive report with four key findings driving the recommendations:

1. The child protection system is fragmented and compartmentalized
2. The system lacks capacity to respond to demand.
3. The service continuum is too narrowly focused on intervention after abuse has occurred.
4. Families and communities should participate in designing and delivering services and interventions.

The report was thoughtful, comprehensive, and contained recommendations frustratingly similar to those in this Mālama ʻOhana Working Group report. Thirty years after the creation of the Child Welfare Services Reform Task Force, the Hawaiʻi legislature created the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group because of concerns mirroring these earlier findings. A closer study of the events following the Blueprint for Change report indicates problems with implementation. A 2000 evaluation of progress to implement the Blueprint for Change stated,

> "The progress has been slow over the years, in part because of uncertain and inadequate funding, problems in staffing the [coordinating] committee, and uncertainties about strategies and objectives."

To avoid this fate and provide a substantial return on the investment of time, spirit, and manaʻo poured into this initiative (in addition to funding and other resources from our funding partners and collaborators), the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group must obtain funding and a stable foundation so it can clarify and implement the strategies for improving outcomes for children.

The implementation framework, which has yet to be developed, must include the following tasks:

- Continue to listen to and uplift the voices and wisdom of lived expertise in the community.
- Continue to collaborate with and seek the counsel of parents, youth, caregivers, service providers, and state agencies.
- Convene implementation teams to implement recommendations and concrete action steps presented in this Report.
- Convene research teams to continue developing concepts presented in the vision.
- Convene a design and tracking team to sequence the steps leading to a transformed state for families and children, develop budgets and make funding requests, and track and report on progress.
- Provide an annual report to the legislature.

As the next steps unfold, we want to highlight that the Department of Human Services and Child Welfare Services, as currently configured, cannot be charged with implementing widescale changes without an infusion of expertise, resources, staff, and additional workplace supports for existing staff. Acknowledging this, we ask the legislature to grant all funding requests from the Hawaiʻi Department of Human Services, Hawaiʻi Department of Health, and the Hawaiʻi Office of Wellness and Resilience related to continued planning and implementation of activities and recommendations flowing from Act 86, signed into law on June 14, 2023.

IV. Hopes and Dreams

This is a report about what the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group heard from our communities, our children, our youth, our parents, and our families. We are indebted to those who shared their experiences with us. Every conversation was painful. We are also indebted to those on our working group and CWS who listened with open hearts and genuine concern. Participants expressed many deep-set emotions including shame, regret, anger, fear, and frustration in every conversation. But the strongest feelings were hope and resilience. So, we begin our report here—with presenting the hopes and dreams that were shared in our conversations.

The working group experienced moments when we felt that our efforts contributed to easing pain and promoting healing. The communities that welcomed us also expressed gratitude for the opportunity to grieve and to share. Especially in those communities that experienced recent tragedies, tears were shed, and embraces were shared. We also celebrated the community strengths, the churches, the aunties and uncles, and the community organizations that already provide the kind of help that is needed but struggle to sustain their work. Perhaps the most important message we shared was the hope that we can shift the burden of shame from individuals and CWS to society at large, especially our elected officials. It is the collective and collaborative shared kuleana that is our greatest hope.

A. Community Aspirations

Children and youth want:

- To be safe, loved, healthy, and have their physical, material, and emotional needs met by their parents and family members.
- If health or safety concerns arise, to exhaust all options that would allow them to live safely with their families before they are made to leave their families.
- When agencies get involved in their families, to be fully and honestly informed about all matters impacting their lives; be respected and treated with compassion; understand their rights and responsibilities; have an informed support system to help them access services, maintain connections, and uphold their rights; actively and meaningfully participate in decisions and decision-making events; and advocate for themselves and their families.

Parents want:

- To nurture their keiki and keep them safe and housed.
- To meet their own and their children's physical, material, and emotional needs.
- To easily access support and services to achieve these goals without fear of judgment, punishment, or increased risk of CWS involvement.
- When agencies get involved in their families, to be respected and treated with compassion, understand their rights and responsibilities, have an informed support system to help them access services and quickly resolve agency concerns, actively and meaningfully participate in decisions and decision-making events, and be fully and honestly informed about all matters impacting their lives.

Families and Communities want:

- To address root causes that lead to and perpetuate system involvement and prevent families from creating safe, stable, and nurturing homes for their keiki.
- Protection and healing for adults and children who have been or are being harmed.
- Their needs, experience, and knowledge to drive resource allocations, service arrays, system design, and service delivery pathways.
- Services to be available in their communities, and preferably provided by those within their community.
- Government agencies and government-funded services to be effective and accountable.
- For people and institutions that offer assistance or support to:
  - Respect and elevate the dignity, desires, and abilities of parents, children, and kin.
  - Understand, respect, and integrate cultural norms, wisdom, and traditions in their approach to supporting families.
  - Understand historical and present trauma and oppression and have the knowledge, skills, and resources to help effectively or refrain from intervention if unable to improve the situation.
  - Offer responses that address identified needs.
  - Understand and have the ability and resources to address interconnected factors that compound trauma and dysfunction, including intimate partner violence, substance use disorders, and criminal justice system involvement.
  - Work collaboratively with families, children, and support systems to ensure the best outcomes for keiki, prioritizing family preservation and connections.

B. System Critiques

If fulfilled, the hopes and dreams articulated above will address collective and individual needs in our society that were revealed through the mo'olelo (stories) bravely shared by participants in our process.

These needs are encapsulated in the following critiques of our current systems and structures:

1. **Insufficient understanding and consideration of historical factors**
   - State and social services systems, particularly those involving CWS, lack adequate awareness of historical contributors to current situations and appropriate trauma-informed responses to both historical and present trauma.

2. **Inadequate prevention focus**
   - Hawai'i has a shortage of resources dedicated to prevention, especially primary prevention and universal supports. Many struggling individuals are unaware of available services or how to access them.

3. **Barriers to accessing intervention services**
   - Seeking help for substance use disorders, mental health issues, domestic violence, and even basic supports feels too risky due to mistrust of systems and fear of CWS involvement. The process of accessing these services is often overly complicated.

4. **Complexity and alienation in CWS interactions**
    - Families involved with CWS find it challenging to navigate the complicated system and related services. The experience often feels adversarial, confusing, secretive, and isolating for both children and parents, causing further trauma.

5. **Structural inefficiencies and lack of accountability**
    - The child welfare system and related systems are not user-friendly for staff or families, lack sufficient accountability measures, and suffer from fragmentation and isolation between different components.

C. Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Recommendations

The Mālama ʻOhana Working Group is tasked with recommending "transformative changes to the state's existing child welfare system." Knowing that families involved with the child welfare system have pasts and futures outside the child welfare system, and that children exist within families, communities, cultures, systems, and society, the working group understood that to improve outcomes from a system designed to resolve needs and problems, the causes of those needs and problems must simultaneously be addressed.

From this process emerged a comprehensive vision for enhancing the ways Hawaiʻi prioritizes, supports, and uplifts *all* families. This vision should be integral to the state's approach to both preventing child abuse and neglect and the state's response to child maltreatment. The vision stems from the following five recommendations, which respond to the aspirations and goals of participants and address the system critiques.

1. Acknowledge and address historical and present conditions and barriers that perpetuate the overrepresentation of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Island people in categories of need or distress.
2. Prioritize thriving families above all other Hawaiʻi commitments by providing universal family supports.
3. Provide accessible, trauma-responsive, specialized supports and interventions outside the child welfare system for parents facing intense challenges.
4. When CWS intervenes in a family, ensure that the intervention is respectful and supportive, minimizes trauma, and does not create more harm than the original issue they hoped to address.
5. Ensure that systems, services, processes, and procedures are coordinated, accountable, and efficient with robust oversight, adequate funding, appropriate staffing, and high operational standards.

V. Insights and Experiences fom Our Communities

This section describes what the working group learned from individuals with personal experience with the child welfare system as parents, children, relatives, resource caregivers, and professionals. Experiences, observations, and recommendations were gathered through Permitted Interaction Groups, verbal and written testimony at public meetings, the online survey, and emails submitted to conveners. The Permitted Interaction Groups collected information through interviews with subject matter experts, meetings, research, focus groups, and site visits. The working group's five recommendations provide an organizing structure for sharing this information.

The sections that follow preserve the essence of the experiences, insights, observations, and recommendations, although information has been condensed. Individual statements and stories are shared in ways that do not identify specific speakers. The information in this section of the report led to the question, **"Given what was shared, what can we do in response?"** The answers to that question are contained in the vision of the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group in Section VI.

The stories we heard from those with lived experience were diverse. The experiences of youth, family members, resource caregivers, service providers, and community members were each unique, reflecting differences in family situations and individual encounters. The stories we heard illustrate the diversity of system interactions from the perspectives of children, parents, extended family members, resource caregivers, and more. A sampling of their perspectives is shared here, to provide context for the presentation of the needs they identified and the solutions they recommended. Those who spoke with us included youth and children who were taken from parents they loved and forced to live with strangers in foster care. Youth who do not feel they can trust expressing their needs and concerns, because they cannot trust that they will be protected or heard. Parents carrying trauma and frustration with a system that judges and punishes. Parents who were ground down by the stress of scarcity—no stable home, no stable income, no transportation, no practical access to help. Parents who were reported to CWS for reasons unrelated to child maltreatment. Families searching for solutions to substance use disorders, domestic violence and mental health issues. Relatives who tried to keep their families together, with varying degrees of success. Grieving relatives who begged for help for their children, but did not receive the help they needed. Resource caregivers who tried to create supportive havens for hurting children. Dedicated people working in schools, Child Welfare Services (CWS), nonprofits, and government agencies who see first-hand how funding, laws, policies, and leadership can support—but usually fail—families living at the margins.

To summarize the picture that emerged from lived experience, and the data of lived experience that we collected, we return to the three questions that were consistently asked in each community meeting: what are the strengths of the child welfare system; what are the needs of the community; and what are your hopes for the child welfare system.

A. The Strengths of the Child Welfare System are...

Reviewing the volumes of notes from the Permitted Interaction Groups, community meetings, surveys and other meetings, we did not hear many strengths of the child welfare system as it currently exists. But stories of individual heroism were shared about all aspects of the system.

The primary strengths that people highlighted were centered around three themes:

1. Committed, compassionate individuals in CWS and the community who changed lives.
2. The provision of concrete supports like food, clothing, school supplies, and financial help to families in crisis.
3. The preservation of family connections despite challenging circumstances.

One former foster youth shared about a social worker who cared and listened. The young person said the social worker helped her access services that encouraged her to find her voice and reach her goals. She also had a supportive resource caregiver (foster parent) who supported her desire to keep in touch with her mother and extended family. She described the child welfare system as a system of luck, and she was lucky—she had a caring caseworker who took time for her, and she received the support and services she needed.

CWS employees said that the individuals they worked with are bright spots. They described their co-workers as "amazing dedicated people" and "salvation, saving grace, sanity safeguards." They also spoke highly of the families they served, saying "sometimes my clients make this job fulfilling and satisfactory." One comment summarizes this section: "the bright spots and positive experiences in CWS … tends to be overshadowed by the bad publicity CWS gets."

We heard stories about community strengths in the form of individuals in government, schools, non-profit organizations, churches, and families who stepped in to provide food, gifts, and a supportive ear. We heard about a teacher who listened to a child talk about the struggles his family was experiencing and who quickly responded that night with a cooler full of food and a quick trip to the store for some toys for the children. Years later she bumped into the mother of that family who told her that that kindness helped her not only survive but have hope and that those toys were still cherished by those children.

The survey responses highlighted the bright spots of dedicated CWS employees, instances when families were helped by clear communication and the provision of supports, and times when family and sibling connections were preserved. One family wrote, "it's all been positive but under negative circumstances." A person who had been in foster care shared appreciation for the efforts made by their social workers: "A lot of bad things happen to children, and it appears that it may be inevitable in some situations for children to be removed from their homes. I am grateful for the two social workers that worked with my family and I felt they did the best work they could at that time."

An example of helpful communication was a caseworker providing information about a "child's care and replacement home." A family shared, "CWS was able to help my children with clothing, school supplies, and much more. During that time, they provided what I could not, as I was in survival mode and unable to financially support my children." Another family said that "financial assistance in many aspects" was a bright spot.

Families and former or current foster youth reported that efforts to cultivate and maintain sibling and other family connections are bright spots of the child welfare system. When asked about bright spots, one family shared, "The CWS worker assigned to my family's case advocated for my siblings to stay within the home." A former or current foster youth shared, "The support of family connections and being creative with making contacts work" was a bright spot. Another foster youth shared, "My therapist worked hard to have visits between me and my brother during therapy."

B. The Needs of the Community are...

While the strengths and bright spots focused mostly on individuals—the heroes and the instances in which connections were made and help was provided—the concerns were primarily about the system as a whole, with three commonly mentioned systemic problems:

- Agencies operate in silos, with little coordination between the Departments of Health, Education, and Human Services.
- Services that provide help for concerns such as domestic violence, the needs of disabled parents and children, and mental health are badly needed, but scarce, especially in rural areas.
- An underlying concern that families are harmed rather than helped by child welfare service involvement.

Acknowledge and address historical and present conditions and barriers that perpetuate the overrepresentation of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Island people in categories of need or distress

A persistent theme in the Permitted Interaction Groups and community meetings was that parents, children, providers, and systems have been systematically disconnected from Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander cultures. Many Native Hawaiians shared feelings of heaviness, grief, and oppressive sadness, sometimes referred to as a collective feeling of kaumaha. For many, this stems from cumulative trauma including colonization, the overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom, and dispossession of land, language, and customs. The collective trauma from these events is handed down to each generation, while simultaneously, additional injustices continue to accumulate. Additional injustices include continuing racism and marginalization, harm to the ʻāina from humans and climate change, the high cost of living in Hawaiʻi, the lack of affordable housing options, a higher rate of surveillance by and contact with agencies such as police and CWS, and the removal of children from their homes and communities.

Many people shared their thoughts on the present-day impact of historical trauma and ways to help people heal from historical and present trauma. They said there is not enough acknowledgement of the role of historical trauma and ongoing structural and systemic racism as a major factor in the overrepresentation of Native Hawaiians in multiple systems. Acknowledging these contributing causes is an important step to begin redressing historical injustices and developing more culturally responsive and effective interventions that address both immediate needs and root causes. A sentiment shared by many was that unless we talk about and try to address the original trauma, we're just putting on Band-Aids and the wounds will continue to ooze.

Taking children from their homes, particularly when they are placed in homes that are not of their culture, perpetuates disconnection and trauma. This is compounded when visits don't occur soon after separation and siblings aren't placed together. Children need to stay connected to people they view as family. They also need to participate in activities that enhance their cultural awareness and pride.

The needs expressed through the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group process highlighted that there is no comprehensive strategy to account for the *role of historical trauma in child welfare system involvement*.

Furthermore, child welfare and court systems are inconsistent with traditional Hawaiian practices and values. People expressed a desire to incorporate traditional practices such as ho'oponopono and to legally recognize hanai and luhi (adoption or temporary care) to support family connections. Some people wanted a cultural court with cultural experts who would understand and elevate the roles of extended blood and chosen family members in decision making.

Many people expressed concern about caseworkers' and service providers' lack of understanding of and sensitivity to many of the cultures present in Hawai'i, especially Polynesians and Micronesians. People who aren't fluent in English are disadvantaged in their interactions with CWS, service providers, and courts, as are people with customs that differ from Western middle-class norms. Several people wanted meetings, documents, and official proceedings to take place in the language of the family to ensure full participation and understanding.

Prioritize thriving families above all other Hawai'i commitments

Many of the mo'olelo (stories) shared were about what parents needed to avoid CWS involvement and what they needed for successful reunification. Many of the stories included a statement of "if I had had this, my children would not have been taken." The needs inserted in place of "this" reveal a lack of support for vulnerable families: stable housing, consistent food, transportation to access basic services or meet basic needs, accessible healthcare.

Families should not be separated due to poverty.

Many community members shared that struggles to meet basic needs don't just affect families at the front door of CWS. They said that Hawai'i needs to create conditions in which parents can meet their own and their children's physical, material, and emotional needs so 'ohana and keiki can thrive. In the Permitted Interaction Group reports and testimony, there was not a clear delineation between supports needed for all parents, supports needed for parents facing a crisis or hardship, and supports for parents involved with CWS—there was just an acknowledgement that Hawai'i must do better at supporting families.

We don't have a universal primary prevention approach to supporting families, and our safety net for the most vulnerable families has big pukas. Even when resources might be available, there is a lack of access to those resources—Hawai'i does not have a comprehensive, accessible pathway for parents to get support before a hardship becomes a crisis. And if a hardship or struggle evolves into a crisis, the intervention that is most typically offered is a referral to CWS. Furthermore, when services are offered, there is often a mismatch between what CWS can offer and what the family truly needs.

In Waimanalo, one community member said every family experiences housing instability, but families are quick to open their doors and find corners on the floor for the children. But families also fear that these arrangements could be considered inadequate or unsafe by CWS.

While this list of needs looks short, these needs are experienced in every community the working group visited—they were mentioned by several people in every meeting and by many survey respondents:

- Housing
- Food
- Clothing
- Money
- Mental health services (for youth and adults)
- Supports for parents of infants and young children
- Childcare
- Transportation
- Healthcare

The barriers to accessing resources were many:

- Many people didn't know how to find out what might be available to help them.
- People who didn't have transportation or internet were limited to hearing about resources from other people.
- Information about resources may not have been available in the language someone speaks.
- Eligibility criteria block access for many.
- Many people can't complete the processes required to access support because they don't have a smartphone, computer or internet.
- People may not be able to receive phone calls or make multiple calls.
- Some people don't have access to required information or paperwork such as social security cards, birth certificates, immigration documents, ID cards, and many don't have a reliable mailing address.

Many of the mo'olelo (stories) shared were about what parents needed to avoid CWS involvement and what they needed for successful reunification. Many of the stories included a statement of "if I had had this, my children would not have been taken." The needs inserted in place of "this" reveal a lack of support for vulnerable families: stable housing, consistent food, transportation to access basic services or meet basic needs, accessible healthcare

Most troubling is that parents whose children were placed into foster care are often caught in limbo—they need certain things in place to have their children returned, but their children must be in their care in order for them to access resources that would allow them to have those things in place. This type of dilemma harms children and families and should be eliminated.

Provide accessible, trauma-responsive, specialized supports and interventions outside the child welfare system for parents facing challenges

> Many parents and family members said that they wanted to get help and were afraid to. They believed that if they sought help, particularly for needs that negatively affected their ability to function as a parent, then CWS would take their children.

Parents shared the loneliness of challenges they faced, compounded by the fear of being judged, punished, or having their children removed. They know that most official sources of help are mandated reporters. CWS is viewed as the agency that takes children, not as a resource that helps parents. Fear of losing their children even prevents people from seeking healthcare services.

Even when people are willing to seek out help, the unfortunate truth is that few easily accessible services exist for parents who have needs that substantially impact their ability to function as a parent.

The situations that were described in community meetings included having an unhealthy relationship with substances, especially illegal ones, being a victim of domestic violence, living with depression or other mental health concerns, struggling with uncontrollable anger or engaging in violence against loved ones. Services for these concerns are typically considered "treatment" and involve multiple steps to access and complete. In addition to concerns about negative consequences of seeking help, barriers to access include knowing who to call, transportation, eligibility criteria, and insurance parameters.

Families who experienced housing instability and homelessness felt like they were in an especially difficult position. They knew parents whose children had been taken because the family was homeless, so they were afraid to get help. But without help, their situation wouldn't change. One woman shared that she had housed a mother and child who were homeless in order to help prevent the child from being taken away.

The woman had previously worked with a social worker because of situations in her own family and took this step to prevent another mother from getting involved with CWS.

Yet another complication arises for parents who are incarcerated—complying with CWS service plans and accessing appropriate services is extremely difficult for those parents. A mother who had been incarcerated shared that she did not know what was happening with her CWS case and there were many barriers to visitation with her children. A lack of communication between parents and children causes trauma for both. Having an incarcerated parent is an adverse childhood experience, layered atop the adverse childhood experience of abuse or neglect. The cumulative effect of adverse childhood experiences increases the likelihood of long-term negative impacts on physical and mental health, relationships, employments, and well-being.

A common concern was the need for specialized understanding about the dynamics of domestic violence. One grandmother shared about how her daughter, a victim of domestic violence, sought help from the police, but they repeatedly failed to intervene. After the daughter died by suicide, CWS placed the children with the abusive parent. Some mothers shared that even though they were being abused or controlled by their partners, they and their children were punished. Mothers weren't believed or weren't provided with resources to safely leave their partners and children were taken from both parents even though only one parent abused the rest of the family. People said CWS needs more training about domestic violence and more resources to help them appropriately assess, understand, and help mothers and children when they are threatened, hurt, and controlled by the mother's husband or partner. That the CWS system is used as a "weapon" instead of a protection, can produce a perverse, negative effect.

Many parents with an active CWS service plan would like more help with accessing services—in addition to the barriers already listed, cold-calling service providers is a daunting task for anyone. Also, parents are wary of CWS workers and treatment providers. They would like to work in partnership with CWS, but the process often feels coercive because parents feel like the worker can remove their children or restrict visitation. Parents aren't sure how much information is shared between treatment providers and CWS and the courts.

When CWS intervenes in a family, ensure that the intervention is respectful and supportive, minimizes trauma, and does not create more harm than the original issue they hoped to address.

Because many people think of the child welfare system as CWS and foster care, and because the focus of the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group is to transform the child welfare system, the majority of stories and recommendations were centered around the experiences that people had while they were involved with CWS.

One belief shared by everyone is that CWS involvement should make things better, not worse. At a minimum, system involvement should improve outcomes and not compound trauma. If CWS intervention does not demonstrably enhance a child's well-being, involvement should be considered carefully or avoided.

Interactions and services need to be grounded in a trauma-informed, culturally responsive approach

Youth and parents shared that CWS caseworkers did not connect with children and parents on a personal level, see them as complex human beings, or understand their strengths and needs within the context of their lives—their history, their culture, and their present circumstances. Examples of this included parents who felt a lack of human connection through the screening process, caseworkers not spending enough time in families' homes to understand them or their cultural context, and caseworkers treating people as stereotypes. Some parents believe that their caseworker was biased against them because of their race or sexual orientation. In survey responses, people described their experiences as "tragic," "uncomfortable," "heartbreaking and humiliating," "abrupt and scary," and "horrific." Parents said they felt a lack of empathy, consideration, and respect from workers. Many youth and parents experienced the system as punitive rather than supportive. They felt disempowered and discriminated against because of their race and because they weren't fluent in English, were poor, or were less-educated than the workers.

Youth and parents said they needed someone to help them through the process. They wanted someone who spoke their language, knew their culture, and knew the system to help them understand what was happening and help them get what they needed.

Families whose first language was not English felt particularly isolated and uninformed. They sometimes felt like only minimal efforts were made to share information in their primary language. Youth who were placed in homes with customs, food, and language that were foreign to them felt particularly lonely. One foster parent shared that a young child was placed in her home without background information, and she only realized later that the child did not speak or understand English.

In every setting, people expressed the need for trauma-informed and culturally sensitive responses and interactions. People specifically mentioned some groups of people who are treated differently or impacted more negatively by the child welfare system because of service providers' lack of sensitivity, lack of training or understanding about these groups, geographic and language barriers, and individuals' biases and misperceptions. These groups include Native Hawaiians, Micronesians, parents whose partners are abusive and controlling, parents struggling with substance use disorders, individuals who are Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer, and families whose culture and customs differ greatly from the workers assigned to their cases.

Youth and adults were concerned about physical and emotional safety. Some youth said that caseworkers didn't protect them from harm—some workers didn't ask the youth what was going on, others didn't listen when the youth told them about their situation, and some intimidated youth to keep them from speaking out. Some family members said their concerns about children weren't addressed, and therefore children were left in dangerous situations. When describing interactions with CWS workers, many people said they did not feel like it was safe to speak openly—they feared punishment or retaliation and had learned not to expect help.

Resource caregivers also feared losing the children in their homes or their licenses for making a complaint or request. Repeatedly a family member reported her concern that a child in her family is currently being abused, but she was not satisfied that her concern was taken seriously.

At every meeting, people said that families in the child welfare system suffer from historical trauma, generational trauma, present trauma, and trauma from CWS involvement, and very little is done to address all that trauma. They said families need to heal:

"Address the long-standing unmet need for healing among families who have been involved with CWS, and in turn, address mistrust and fear of CWS among Hawaii's communities."

People expressed that taking children away from their families is traumatic. One person said in a survey, "The system destroyed our 'ohana and we struggle every day to make up for lost time and help each other overcome the trauma caused by CWS. My other [son's partner] had an abortion because he sees all the obstacles that CWS puts in place for young parents who are the most vulnerable and need the most support...." Another thought the process would have been less traumatic for the whole family if CWS had communicated with them: "Speaking of my own experience, I feel the worker should of explained to me what was going on instead of just taking me from the school and small kine kidnap. I feel children should be educated and spoken to. I mean it is about their safety."

Children and youth need help in processing emotions, including those stemming from neglect, abuse, poverty, being placed with strangers, and being disconnected from everything familiar. People shared how harmful it is for siblings to be separated and for children to be disconnected from their extended families, culture, friends, schools, and activities. Despite all this harm caused to children, they are not provided with sufficient tools or mechanisms for healing like therapy, mental health treatment, cultural healing practices, and frequent contact with parents and siblings.

Youth in particular described interactions with CWS as unnecessarily punitive, embarrassing, and stigmatizing. They said that CWS interactions should never occur at school or other places where people who know the youth could see. Youth felt like adults consistently lied to them or omitted information and that few adults cared how they felt or what they wanted. They said they needed to be listened to—they were the experts on their lives—but they were disrespected and disregarded. And then no support was provided to help them heal from the resulting injuries.

One person who had aged out of foster care shared through the survey, "I would have like[d] more opportunities to discuss legal permanency even when it seems like aging out was the likely goal. I would have liked to engage in family therapy with my mother or minimally become educated about my mother's mental health diagnosis and how to interact with her in a positive way, as I often interacted with her even after aging out of care."

Many youth and resource caregivers said the out-of-home placement process was not designed to meet children's needs. Foster homes did not receive the information, training, or support they needed to provide trauma-responsive care for children and youth. Some resource caregivers struggled emotionally and financially with caring for children, and they weren't able to access the support they needed. Some people shared that there was a lack of alignment between the expectations of resource caregivers and CWS. Many youth were placed in multiple homes, which disrupted their lives and damaged their emotional and physical health—they lost trust in people and systems and often had no place to get emotional or practical support. They felt powerless and frustrated and disconnected. One youth said foster parents who become foster parents because of the money shouldn't do it. And they shouldn't make the children feel like they are a burden or complain to the youth that they don't get enough money.

Photo Credit: Ki'i Kalo Photography

Families need help to create safe and stable homes, to heal and to have successful reunification

Parents with a screened in CWS report reported feeling overwhelmed, confused, and shame. They wanted someone to talk to who wouldn't judge them and who had the experience and knowledge to help them figure out what to do. Several parents said they felt isolated from family and community and didn't feel like they had much of a voice with CWS in deciding next steps.

Many parents shared that navigating the system and complying with CWS requirements was extremely hard. They wanted more help connecting with appropriate services and completing their service plans. Many reported that required services were delayed because of shortages and waitlists. They also said that the things they had to do weren't necessarily tailored to address their needs or their children's needs. The system wasn't flexible or personalized. For example, requirements for housing and sleeping arrangements seemed to prioritize having separate bedrooms over keeping children with family and those requirements were often a barrier to reunification. The eligibility criteria for accessing supports such as economic or housing assistance or substance use disorder treatment were more often a barrier than a pathway to help. Families in rural locations reported that they were required to relocate to O'ahu for treatment and services.

Among the concerns about the burden on families involved with CWS is a concern about the financial costs for relatives who want to care for family members.

Even though relatives can serve as resource caregivers and receive services, many barriers exist to working within the system. Furthermore, people who want to become legal guardians or adoptive parents often face long waits for legal help, even though the state should be providing attorneys for those processes. Families who can afford to do so, hire private attorneys to represent them and help them navigate the process. One mother borrowed $20,000 to pay for an attorney.

Another grandparent spoke about spending thousands of dollars for an attorney to complete an adoption. This perpetuates inequities in the system, with some families having minimal or no legal help because they have or are waiting for overburdened court-appointed or agency-facilitated counsel (depending on the proceeding), and other families using their own resources to hire lawyers. Most importantly, this delays permanency for children and reduces their access to services or resources.

When children weren't removed but parents were required to get treatment or services, many parents were fearful that being honest with treatment providers could result in their children being removed because of mandated reporting. Several parents felt like they were blamed for problems but weren't provided with the support to change their situation. For example, a mother might be given a choice to separate from an abusive partner or lose her children, but not offered alternative housing if she left the partner. So, if she left, she would then risk losing her children due to being homeless.

Photo Credit: Ki'i Kalo Photography

Given the barriers to accessing services or the length of time needed to complete treatment and aftercare for substance use disorder or find "appropriate" housing, many parents felt like the time frames the child welfare system imposes on parents for reunification or termination of parental rights is unrealistic.

Some parents talked about problems in the way the system worked with two parents. Sometimes partners use the system to punish or continue abusing their partner, by filing unfounded TROs or making unfounded reports to the CWS hotline. Parents shared that there didn't seem to be a clear process in situations where one parent was working hard to complete their service plan and the other parent was not. Similarly, the approach to families in which there was domestic violence was inconsistent and seemed to harm the children and the protective parent more than the abusive parent or partner.

Some parents whose children had been removed and then returned said that the separation was extremely traumatic for the children, and because their children's anger, fear, and anxiety over the disruption wasn't addressed, reunification was stressful—they wanted therapy to be provided for the family members. They also said they needed more support before and after the children were returned—that was an especially difficult time, and they needed increased financial and parenting supports to ensure that the reunification was successful.

Photo Credit: Ki'i Kalo Photography

Family and cultural connections should be maintained

Most people said that getting involved with CWS disconnected them from family, culture, and their sense of identity. Young people said that being separated from their siblings was terribly painful. If siblings can't be kept in one home, they said, they should at least stay in the same school. "Keep keiki with family. Maintaining pilina with family is of the utmost importance. Keiki are cherished by their 'ohana and are connected spiritually and physically to their lineage. This connection should not be broken by intervention."

Fathers felt like they were not prioritized, and their families were sometimes overlooked or excluded as placement resources.

Parents and youth said they didn't have enough contact with each other and youth said they didn't have enough contact with their siblings. Visits often seemed to occur at the discretion of caseworkers and availability of someone to provide transportation or supervise the visits. Families asked that visits be required. Youth who were still in foster care or at home wanted to stay connected to siblings who were placed in permanent homes.

Relatives and adult siblings said it should be easier for them to become relative caregivers. Their experience was that relatives weren't prioritized for being a placement resource, rigid rules applied, and they weren't given extra help to get approved. Some relatives felt like CWS was biased against them, maybe because of their own past history or because of their race and other reasons.

Parents and relatives asked that ‘ohana be prioritized as the first option for placement and that the family, including the children, participate in deciding where the children will be placed. Suggestions included prioritizing ‘ohana as resource caregivers, removing barriers to relatives and adult siblings becoming caregivers, and providing more training, support, and money for resource caregivers. Resource caregivers, both relative and non-relative, shared that they did not have regular supportive connection with assigned caseworkers.

Stories were shared about resource caregivers who brought birth parents in as part of their families and resource caregivers who shut birth parents out. Parents want resource caregivers to build pilina, regularly communicate, and share parenting decisions and responsibilities. They also shared that more opportunities were needed for resource caregivers to build pilina with birth parents.

Children and youth are being harmed by the current system

The young woman who had spent time in foster care who shared about her caring social worker and supportive resource caregiver shared another piece of her story. She said that while she was lucky and got supports, many youth are not lucky. She had a friend who was also in foster care, but did not have the supports that she had. This friend died by suicide.

Some youth shared that being taken out of their parents’ care was necessary and the end result was beneficial. They said that the system protected them from situations that were unhealthy or dangerous.

Even so, they joined the chorus of youth who said that their general experience was one of being left out—they were not told what was happening to them, their parents, or their siblings, and they were not asked to participate in making decisions. They reported that they did not have an adult they trusted who could help them while they were “in the system.” Many felt lied to and disregarded, even when they told mandated reporters that they were unsafe. They wanted people to be honest with them and they wanted compassion and treatment for what they had been through. Some didn’t know their rights and many felt like their rights were violated—they had no one to protect their rights. Many youth said that being in foster care feels like being placed somewhere and forgotten.

Youth shared that separating them from their siblings was one of the most hurtful actions by CWS. They were also hurt by the separation from extended family, especially if family members wanted to take them in and those requests were denied. They wanted to stay in the same school and not be moved between homes.

Young people repeatedly said that they were emotionally and physically hurt by the trauma they had experienced in their lives, and they did not have access to supports or services that would help them heal. They felt isolated, alone, and lonely.

Young adults who had been in care said there is insufficient support for youth aging out of care—they need a stronger array of services and resources, including financial support compatible with the cost of living in Hawai'i. Providers working with older youth said there weren't adequate safety nets or transition support for youth aging out of care, especially if they were also involved with the juvenile justice system, leading to too many youth becoming homeless and having other bad outcomes.

Some service providers expressed concerns about system-involved youth being more vulnerable to sexual exploitation and trafficking, and how to better prevent that. Some youth reported that after a permanent placement like guardianship or adoption, they would have liked more help and support.

Youth highlighted the problems with the current subsidy system for housing, education, and living expenses. They noted that restrictive or conflicting eligibility requirements and funding caps prevented them from getting adequate support.

Overall, they wanted less restrictive requirements for participating in Imua Kakou, more support from the state, and higher subsidies or other financial supports.

Ensure that systems, services, processes, and procedures are coordinated, accountable, and efficient with robust oversight, adequate funding, appropriate staffing, and high operational standards

Families and community members shared stories that formed the following picture of the child welfare system. The child welfare system is based on federal laws, policies, and funding, which are not attuned to local cultures. It is designed as a surveillance system that feels punitive to people who encounter it. It is risk-adverse, inflexible, and philosophically oriented to protect children from perceived or actual harm. Laws and policies are implemented unevenly by overworked and underpaid humans with varying degrees of training, compassion, and abilities.

Families described it as a "system of luck"—the systemic inconsistencies in policy implementation and family engagement were so pervasive that positive outcomes were simply a matter of chance.

The system is not human-friendly—it lacks empathy, support, care, consideration, and understanding for parents. It is rigid and does not allow for flexibility or creativity, so it cannot adapt to family needs, even while acknowledging that each person and family is unique. The system does not align with Native Hawaiian values and is disconnected from the cultures present in Hawai'i. Many people see the system as broken and inefficient and don't trust it. At the same time, most people had high praise for most system actors and agreed that children need protection from abuse.

Prioritize Clear Communication and Transparency with Families

One service provider summarized the child welfare system like this: "For the most part, the system is staffed by hard working people with good intention but is often bogged down by large caseloads, confusing and complicated timelines, policies, and procedures that are again initially created with good intent but not efficient or [are] even counterproductive."

Many youth and parents said they did not understand what was happening after they were contacted by CWS. They said they didn't know their rights, didn't understand the process, and often didn't know how their interactions with system actors would affect their lives forever. They felt alone and confused and believed they were misled and lied to by CWS workers and others. Youth felt like vital information was being withheld from them, even while their entire lives were upended. They were forced to leave home, change schools, and lose contact with friends and family without complete explanations. Youth and parents expressed frustration that no one wanted to hear their story or hear what they wanted or needed. Their opinions were ignored or dismissed.

Youth and parents said that they couldn't get basic information they needed. They couldn't reach caseworkers, lawyers, GALs, or service providers: voice mailboxes were full, calls weren't returned, people didn't show up when they said they would, things they needed were delayed. One service provider said that families call partner agencies for help when they are trying to reach CWS workers.

Youth and families want honest, open, and timely communications. They want clarity about the roles of system actors and how to navigate the systems they are caught up in. While youth and parents talked about the need for stronger advocacy within the court system, they also expressed concerns about the quality of existing lawyers and GALs

People wondered what kind of training judges, lawyers, and GALs receive because based on their experiences, parents did not believe people in the legal system had the requisite understanding of all the issues that affect families. They feel like there is a lack of cultural competence or a trauma-informed approach among most people working in the court system. Furthermore, several people shared concerns about bias, favoritism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and racism within the judiciary (including lawyers and staff) and called for stronger ethics rules and more training.

One area that causes a lot of frustration is timelines. For example, Hawai'i follows federal law which, in most cases, requires a child in a child welfare case to achieve permanency within two years. Many parents say that is not enough time to comply with all the requirements of their service plans, particularly when housing or substance use disorders are factors. While the overall case feels like it is on a fast timeline, access to court hearings, services, and even caseworkers feels like a slow timeline, with multiple delays, waiting lists, and gaps of time between communications with service providers, CWS caseworkers, and lawyers or GALs. All of these things are outside the control of parents—they said they felt helpless, frustrated, and angry. If "the system" is going to impose timelines, it must be set up in a way that families can succeed within the timelines.

Resource caregivers shared similar concerns. They said they often didn't have enough information about children and youth placed with them to appropriately care for and support them. They said it was hard to reach caseworkers and resource caregivers had to figure out how to access supports and services on their own. Resource caregivers received mixed signals about their role related to birth parents. They felt undertrained and under-supported regarding caring for children and interacting with the birth parents.

Many concerns were also raised about communications within and across systems. People experiencing systems felt like things were uncoordinated and disjointed. This was experienced in conflicting requirements, advice, and timeframes; duplicative and time-wasting intakes and assessments; getting passed among workers or agencies when trying to get information or services; and missed visits or appointments and delays in accessing resources or services because of errors, omissions, and miscommunications by system actors. The Permitted Interaction Groups identified a lack of coordination as a contributor to long waiting lists and the inaccessibility and unavailability of state services and systems, especially in more rural locations. They also mentioned that systems like the criminal justice and health care systems don't seem to understand that when their services fail, that has a significant impact on the child welfare system. Therefore, those systems need to engage in the discussion on how to improve the child welfare system.

People were especially concerned about the lack of coordination between CWS and schools, given that all children are required to attend school. The concerns included a lack of communication to parents and resource caregivers about a child's education; the lack of awareness among caseworkers, lawyers, and judges about what is happening with a child's schooling; coordination when a child is moved to a placement away from their current school; questions about how decisions are made about moving a child to a different school; and what coordination occurs around records, transportation, and helping the child perform well.

Concerns were raised about the state's liberal policies for home-schooling and how to know that home-schooled children are safe. One person suggested that the schools could be a source of support for youth, writing "I feel like if there was a way that the school would not only reach out to minors who have gone thru trauma but that there was a triage team that they could call in from CWS or other community agencies to provide forms of outreach and offer support to the family while experiencing trauma maybe the outcome would be different."

Several suggestions that people shared for improving the system are already existing policy, revealing that CWS policies are not being implemented evenly across the state. For example, people wanted CWS to have more flexibility in approving relatives' homes as placements for youth and they wanted CWS to have some flexible funds so that if money could fix a problem that had resulted in a CWS report, CWS should do that and allow the family to exit the system. Both of these are already allowable. The many examples of situations and events where caseworkers acted inconsistently with CWS policies presented a picture of an agency in which caseworker and supervisor activities such as complying with policies, making decisions and recommendations, ensuring children spent enough time with siblings and parents, and allocating discretionary services such as direct financial support varied wildly depending on geographic location and individual workers. Many people, particularly experienced resource caregivers, observed that caseworkers appeared undertrained, under-supported, and overwhelmed.

Communities want to trust that CWS will protect children and help families.

Consistently, descriptions of CWS included, "the system is broken;" "CWS just takes children;" "No one in my community trusts CWS;" "No one listened to me;" "I didn't know what was going on;" "No one believed me;" "I couldn't get help." People are disillusioned with CWS and with the child welfare system overall. "The lawyers don't have time for you." "My lawyer showed up for court but didn't talk to me about my case." "The judge was friends with the caseworkers." "The judge and lawyers were friends." "The caseworkers lied." "The caseworker was friends with the foster parents." "The GAL didn't meet with the children." "My caseworker didn't believe me." "Everyone believed my ex, who was abusing me and using CWS to harass me because I left him." The grievances were raw and honest and revealed a deep distrust of a system that needs community support to succeed in protecting children.

One service provider indicated a lack of response from CWS after multiple attempts of reporting abuse experienced by children in their program. Among families who described situations they believed required CWS intervention, some survey participants said they received help while others reported lack of response, lack of transparency, and various situations in which, in the words of one survey respondent, "[workers] made things worse without even knowing."

Many people expressed frustration, sadness, and anger that a system that was supposed to help children often made things worse. One family talked about what happened when an abuse report was not confirmed.

They said, " be clear and truthful when asking for information....Then let us know the consequences when what the child says and experiences is not enough to proceed with protection or services. There is no follow up or intervention services ready for the child. They go back into [the] same situation branded a liar or snitch. Almost always things get worse but now you have a child who will not speak and ask for help. Be mindful that when you folks step in, it may be the only chance to show you care and can help."

Many people referenced cases that were detailed in news stories. Cases of children tortured and murdered; children placed in homes where people had criminal records; children placed with people even after caseworkers were told they were sexual predators; mothers who were involved with the system only because they were victims of domestic violence, and as a result, their children were separated from them; relatives who knew a child was being hurt and couldn't get the state to protect the child; parents who were wrongly accused of maltreatment and still lost years of their children's lives; children who were abruptly taken from their schools or homes without due process; an assembly-line court process with inadequate representation for parents and children; millions of dollars paid out in settlements while some CWS employees earn wages that place them at the ALICE income level.[4]

[4] ALICE is an acronym for "Asset Limited, Income Constrained, Employed." ALICE households are above the federal poverty line, don't quality for many government assistance programs, yet can't afford the basic necessities for remaining stable and self-sufficient in Hawai'i. See https://www.auw.org/alice-initiative for more information.

A consistent theme across the personal and news stories was frustration with system secrecy. People feel like they have no insights into the operations of a system that deals with life and death issues. When media, individuals, and organizations have requested information about child deaths and serious injury cases, CWS and the courts respond by saying they can't comment due to confidentiality. When their responses are juxtaposed with federal law allowing the sharing of information, it appears that they are hiding something. All of this contributes to an atmosphere of animosity and distrust. Furthermore, CWS policies are not all posted publicly, and it can be hard for people to find the most current policies and procedures. And even when policies and procedures are published many reported caseworkers' inconsistent knowledge about those policies and compliance with procedures.

Many people said they felt like their questions or concerns about a child's safety, actions of an employee, or a process that should be followed were shut down and there was no additional place to bring them. People wanted an independent person they could turn to when they wondered whether personal conflicts or biases were affecting CWS decisions. They wanted a second opinion when CWS said a child was safe but there were signs that the child wasn't. Many people said the system was not accountable to itself or to families. They wanted independent oversight to ensure that policies and procedures were followed and that complaints were taken seriously. They asked for a user-friendly and workable process for redress of concerns or complaints ranging from CWS overreach to CWS failing to protect children to placement of children in dangerous situations to lack of communication to intimidation or retaliation to failure to follow policies to outright fraud. There is no person or agency in Hawai'i with the resources and understanding of the system to receive, investigate, and resolve these types of concerns.

Many people said that the current system structure, including laws, policies, practice, perpetuates oppression and family separation.

There is an absence of trust and cooperation of communities because the system doesn't respect and value children, parents, Native Hawaiian and other cultures, and family connections. People in the system tend to approach families with an us/them perspective, rather than a "we." Parents feel judged. They believe the current system doesn't allow dignity and self-determination of children, parents, or even communities that don't meet the dominant norms.

Instead, they want a system that includes and values the strengths of youth and parents as well as the wisdom and strength of extended family members.

Even as they shared their grievances, people recognized that many of the problems are related to an overburdened system. One person said that CWS needs to increase its capacity to avoid problematic placements, and also said, "I realize there is a lack of licensable homes, but forcing keiki into homes that have no way to become licensed only creates future removals."

The CWS workforce must be highly qualified, expertly trained, and well-compensated

Everyone is concerned about CWS caseworkers, supervisors, other staff, and leadership. While individuals working for CWS were lifted up as the bright spots and the strength of the agency, "the workforce" as a whole was the subject of strong criticism and worry. CWS workers are responsible for making life or death decisions, and they must be up to the task. People are concerned that CWS workers are overworked, overwhelmed, undertrained, and understaffed. Being perpetually understaffed, publicly criticized, and traumatized by harm to children has resulted in low morale and high turnover. Because of the staffing challenges, people are concerned that CWS is hiring workers who are not fully qualified and who do not receive enough training, support, or coaching. Additionally, greater diversity is needed among CWS staff. When an employee is not performing adequately, processes need to be in place to uphold accountability and consistency.

> One service provider summed up the problem as "We [the state] are funding projects that aren't very important, yet we don't have enough money in our county to pay social workers a decent wage? The system is broken. We need less park repairs and way more social workers, so they're not burnt out and can actually do their job. Our children should be treated like humans and not case numbers."

One community service provider shared, "We reported on a case; it took a week to get a call back, and the case worker was apologetic and sounded exhausted. We know they are overworked and this gap causes so many to fall through the cracks." One family shared, "I feel like CWS is trying their best but there is a shortage of staff and a lot of burn out for staff. I feel like there has been shifts with them partnering with service providers and the community. They are headed in the right direction so I feel like continuing this work would possibly bring better outcomes."

Unmet needs for workforce supports identified by CWS employees also include updated technology. One CWS employee shared that their operating systems are "archaic and antiquated." Another CWS employee and service providers indicated outdated internal operating systems and inefficient or non-existent systems for data collection, communications, and documentation. The outdated and deficient technology exacerbates the overload of administrative tasks that take up a disproportionate amount of caseworkers' time.

Many people shared that caseworkers either don't know or don't follow policy. Complaints included that caseworkers don't follow through on what they are supposed to do, they don't communicate with children or parents, and they don't return phone calls. Many concerns were raised about the decisions made by caseworkers and supervisors, and those concerns reflect the many perspectives of people who encounter CWS. Several parents said their involvement with CWS was unjust and unfounded, often as a result of a report made to harass them or in retaliation for disagreeing with CWS actions. Mandated reporters, concerned relatives, and some children and parents said that CWS either didn't take any action, leaving a child in harm's way, or too quickly and incorrectly decided that a child was not being harmed or was not in an unsafe situation.

Several people said that children were placed in abusive, dangerous homes or returned to abusive parents, while some parents said removal decisions were made too quickly and without oversight. Parents said there are too many barriers to reunification, even after safety concerns are addressed.

While these concerns reflect different viewpoints, together they reflect a lack of trust in CWS judgement and decision-making

Most concerns indicated a need for a better resourced system—more workers, higher compensation, better training, and support to heal from trauma. Some concerns were more pointed, though, with a call for accountability; reviews of decision-making; an audit of the agency; oversight of policies, procedures, and practice; and an independent grievance process.

Most people, in one way or another, stressed that almost all the recommendations for change are dependent on CWS addressing its staffing crisis. As one family member said when asked what changes are needed, "Accountability. Which cannot be fully achieved until there are enough trained and caring staff."

The CWS, Judiciary, and Attorney General's approach, values, and mindset must be collaborative, solution-focused, transparent, open, and flexible

CWS is seen as a closed, secretive, and inconsistent agency. While individuals, especially the leaders who participated in the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group process, received high praise, as a whole, the agency does not have the confidence or support of the communities it serves. Negative perceptions and fear of retaliation chill opportunities for collaboration and problem-solving.

Advocates and communities believe that DHS leadership and the Hawai'i Department of the Attorney General narrowly interpret federal and state law and policy, are rigid in their application of policies, are too slow to respond, and automatically assume a defensive stance instead of being curious and open to possibilities. People expressed their frustration at the lack of willingness to be creative by sharing examples from other states (operated under the same federal laws and policies) that they want to see explored here:

- Child welfare services working collaboratively with communities to develop creative, holistic ways to support families and limit unnecessary interactions with child welfare systems.
- Public commissions that review and learn from child deaths and serious injury cases.
- Open courts and partially open records for child welfare cases.
- The use of federal Title IV-E funds for:
  - lawyers for children and parents;
  - families receiving services from resource centers for the homeless;
  - and the provision of economic and concrete supports to prevent family separation.

Aside from examples from other states, youth, parents, and community members expressed a desire (and a need) to continue the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group process to facilitate collaborative problem-solving and system improvement.

People acknowledged the overwhelm that is crushing people working within the child welfare system. No one wants to add additional requirements that cause a mass exodus of leaders and workers. And yet, transformation will change the way CWS operates. The challenge is to focus on solutions rather than blame, creativity rather than rigidity, and to share the load. Many people highlighted that CWS has carried the heaviest burden of "the system." With a redesign of how Hawaiʻi supports families and collaboration and coordination at all levels, the judiciary, the legislature, the Department of Health, the Department of Education, and the Department of the Attorney General can all take on more responsibility for change within their own spheres. And most importantly, people with lived experience within these systems, community members, and the large non-profit service community can all carry part of the load that has previously rested disproportionately on CWS.

C. My Hope for the Child Welfare System is ...

Throughout our community listening sessions, surveys, and working group meetings, participants shared their hopes and dreams for a transformed child welfare system. While individual stories and specific suggestions varied, clear themes emerged about how Hawai'i can better serve and support families and children. A summary of these suggestions is provided below, and Appendix D includes a full list of the hopes shared throughout the process.

These collective aspirations paint a picture of a system that is grounded in traditional Hawaiian values, is trauma-responsive, supports families, prevents family separation whenever possible, has an excellent workforce, and is accountable and responsive.

Systems recognize and address historical trauma and promote cultural practices and strategies for healing

A consistent theme across all islands was the desire for a system grounded in Native Hawaiian values and cultural practices.

Community members envision the inclusion of cultural traditions and practices such as hanai, luhi, ho'oponopono, and the establishment of Pu'uhonua (cultural healing spaces) in every moku. They want to see traditional healing practices and connection to ʻāina recognized and supported as valid frameworks for health and wellbeing. This cultural grounding extends beyond specific practices to a fundamental shift in how the system views and works with families. It includes an exploration of new laws and court processes to preserve and strengthen Native Hawaiian families.

The community dreams of a system where children, when they must be placed outside their homes, live with families who share and can nurture their cultural identity. They want funding for cultural activities and the removal of barriers that prevent youth in care from participating in cultural practices.

Everyone who works with families provides trauma-informed and culturally responsive interactions and care

Children and parents want to be treated with dignity, honesty, and integrity, and have their culture, customs, and language respected.

This requires comprehensive training and coaching on trauma-informed care and Native Hawaiian history and perspectives. It also requires training on other cultures present in Hawai'i and the use of culturally appropriate assessment tools, evaluation instruments, and treatment modalities. The characteristics of trauma-informed care were highlighted often as hopes for a transformed system: accountability, "voice and choice," peer supports, and cultural responsiveness.

A trauma-responsive system is informed by the voices of lived experience. For example, youth want decisions to be made in partnership with them and they want all decisions to improve their wellbeing. For them, trauma-responsive includes honest and timely communications, access to mental health services, and if they are taken from their homes, the removal occurs privately, and they are placed with siblings.

Hawai'i has a culture of mandated supporting

Perhaps the most emphatic hope expressed was for a system that helps families before crises occur. Community members want clear, accessible pathways for families to get help without fear of punishment or child removal.

They envision a network of community-based resource centers (Ka Piko) where families can access concrete supports like housing assistance, food, transportation, and childcare. These centers would offer comprehensive family strengthening programs and universal parent support services that any family could access. Key components of the Ka Piko network would be peer supports and assistance with accessing services.

In addition to an expanded array of basic family supports, also called primary prevention services, the community wants to see greater support for families experiencing more intense difficulties. These are called intervention services and include an expansion of mental health and crisis response services, increased substance use disorder treatment options, and robust domestic violence support services. They emphasize that these services must be available in rural communities and accessible without complex eligibility requirements or long waiting lists. Many participants spoke of the need for emergency family shelters and transitional housing options that keep families together while they stabilize their situations.

While official CWS data may not reflect the following as primary reasons children enter foster care, families and community members overwhelmingly said these are the reasons families they know of were involved with CWS and they are barriers to reunification. **Their hope is that the lack of the following things would be addressed through community resources instead of CWS investigations.**

Basic Needs

- Adequate housing or utilities
- Money for food, hygiene items, and other necessities
- Transportation

Healthcare Access

- Mental and/or physical health care
- Accessible substance use disorder treatment

Family Support

- Childcare
- Knowledge of child development and appropriate parenting

Safety Services

- Support for survivors of domestic violence

Family separation is rare, and family connections are preserved

A profound hope expressed across all groups was that child removal would become a rare last resort, used only when absolutely necessary for child safety. Community members want to see robust in-home support services that help families address challenges while keeping children safely at home. When children must be removed, they want more time and support for family members to arrange alternative care, fewer barriers to relative caregiving, and better support for family visitation and maintaining connections.

Participants consistently emphasized the importance of keeping siblings together and maintaining children's connections to their culture and community. They want youth to have a voice in placement decisions and support for maintaining family relationships even after adoption. For youth transitioning out of care, they want to see comprehensive support that recognizes the ongoing importance of family and cultural connections.

Systems are Transparent, Accountable, and the Workforce is Excellent

Communities want a transparent, accountable system that earns and maintains public trust. They envision independent oversight, effective complaint resolution processes, and regular public reporting on system performance. They want to see careful review and learning from critical incidents, with meaningful community engagement in system monitoring and improvement. They want a flexible and fair approach to the individual needs of families and individuals.

Critical to this vision is a supported, well-trained workforce. Community members recognize that caseworkers need manageable caseloads, competitive compensation, comprehensive training, and support for addressing secondary trauma. They want to see career development pathways that help build and maintain a diverse, culturally competent workforce that can provide excellent service to families.

Community members identified several crucial elements that must exist for a transparent and accountable system:

- Continued collaboration with the community and uplifting voices of lived experience
- Adequate funding for all parts of the system, including primary prevention services
- Independent oversight of the system as a whole
- An independent process to address individual complaints and concerns
- A highly qualified, well-trained, properly supported excellent workforce
- Protection of the rights of children, parents, and family members
- Honest and open communication at every level
- Coordination and collaboration within and between systems and agencies
- Modern, user-friendly, reliable data systems and supporting technology

From Community Voice to System Change

These hopes and dreams represent our community's vision for a transformed child welfare system. They require sustained commitment, adequate resources, and continued partnership between government agencies and communities. Most importantly, they require maintaining focus on our shared goal: ensuring all keiki are safe and all 'ohana are supported.

Implementation must be guided by continued community voice and participation, strong political and funding commitment, regular progress assessment, and flexibility to adapt and improve. While the path forward requires significant change at multiple levels, the consistent message from our communities is one of hope - hope that by working together, we can create a system that truly serves and supports Hawai'i's families and children.

The ultimate hope is for a system that lives up to the meaning of Mālama 'Ohana - truly caring for, nurturing, and protecting our families. This means shifting from a system focused on child removal to one that strengthens families, honors cultural wisdom, and ensures every child grows up safe, healthy, and connected to their family and culture. While ambitious, these hopes reflect our community's deep commitment to creating better outcomes for generations to come.

VI. Our Shared Vision of How We Can Mālama ʻOhana

This section presents a powerful vision of how Hawaiʻi would support families and protect children if the needs that participants shared were addressed and the recommendations were incorporated into a comprehensive approach. In drafting this vision, we reviewed testimony provided in meetings and submitted in writing, the recommendations provided by the Permitted Interaction Groups, and the survey responses. We thoughtfully considered what we, as a working group, and we, as a community and a state, *could* do in response, and what we *must* do.

To help coalesce the many recommendations into actionable steps, we borrowed from a Nā Kama a Hāloa strategy of envisioning a "future state." In our vision, the community and CWS work in partnership to ensure all keiki are safe and ʻohana are supported. This vision presents one pathway to transformation. While it does not incorporate all the recommendations nor address all the needs, if implemented, it will transform our community into a place where all families and children are nurtured, supported, and safe.

This section provides a broad vision of a transformed system, incorporating essential concepts recommended by the community. The Mālama ʻOhana Working Group process was not designed to provide a detailed action plan—developing and implementing the concepts presented in this vision require deep discussion, research, and planning—an endeavor that is beyond the time and scope of our working group. Recommendations from the Permitted Interaction Groups and others provided more detail for some parts of the vision than others. For readability and to avoid emphasizing some things over others simply because they include more details, additional information is included in appendices.

A. Components of the Hawaiʻi Family Support System

A transformed system is complex with multiple levels. Figure A depicts the three foundational elements that infuse the entire system, the levels at which change must continuously occur, and the fundamental components of this new system. The components of this visual are discussed in the sections that follow.

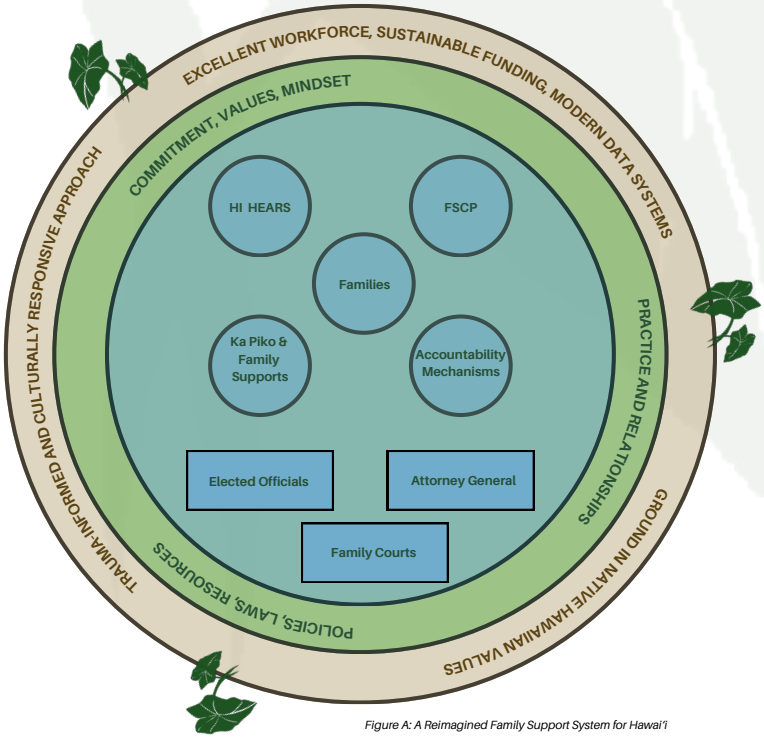


Figure A: A Reimagined Family Support System for Hawaiʻi

A Reimagined Family Support System for Hawai'i

For this vision to be successful, all design elements must be implemented as a unified whole. The seven components of the reimagined family support system work interdependently and must be built upon the three foundational elements. Previous plans failed due to partial implementation, which cannot succeed in an interconnected system.

This transformation demands commitment, oversight, resources, and collaboration from all stakeholders. While creating lasting change requires perseverance, families need our help now—we must act with both urgency and sustained dedication.

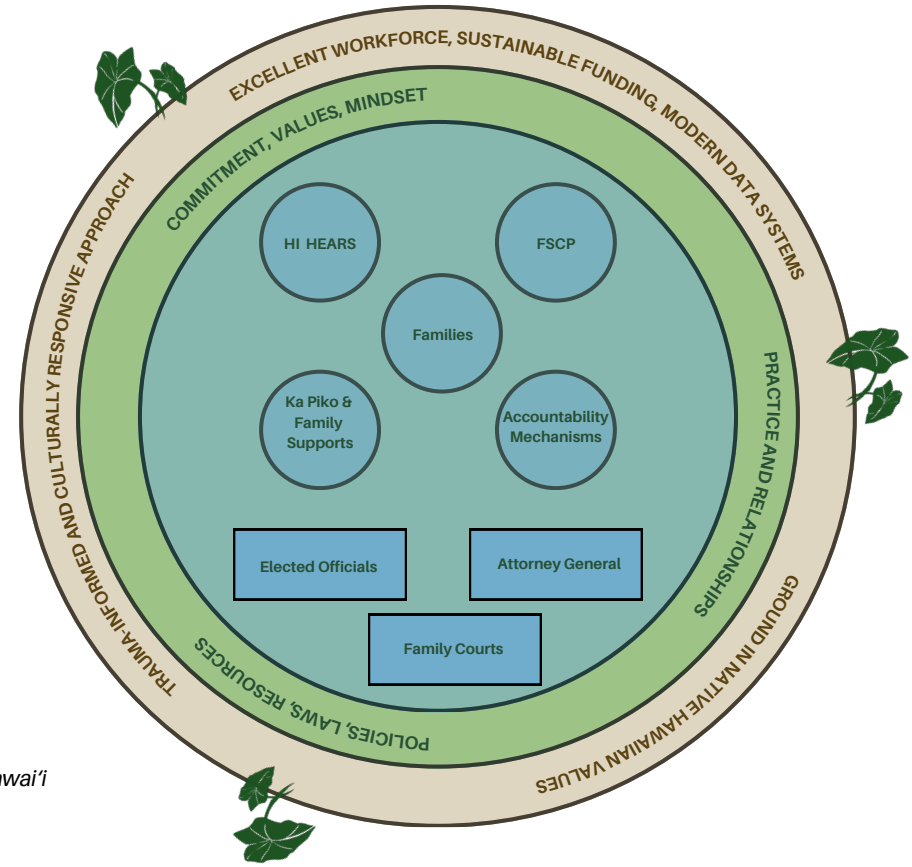


Figure A: A Reimagined Family Support System for Hawai'i

The **outermost ring** consists of three foundational elements.
The system is:

1. Grounded in traditional Hawaiian values
2. Trauma-informed and culturally responsive
3. Powered by an excellent workforce, sustainable funding, and modern data systems.

The **next ring** demonstrates that change is continuously required at three levels of human behaviors and system designs:

1. Commitment, values, mindset: the foundations of our work
2. Policies, laws, resources: the fundamental structures that govern our system
3. Practice and relationships: how we work with and support families and system partners

The **large inner circle** includes seven essential components of a reimagined family support system:
New Constructs

1. Hawai'i HEARS
2. Ka Piko and Comprehensive Family Supports
3. Family Support and Child protection Branch (a realigned and repurposed CWS)
4. Accountability Mechanisms

Existing Structures

1. The Family Courts
2. The Department of the Attorney General
3. The House, Senate, and Governor's office

B. Foundational Elements for a Transformed Family Support System

Our vision draws strength from three core foundations: a grounding in Native Hawaiian values, providing trauma-responsive interactions and services, and a commitment to sustainable, comprehensive funding. The absence of these foundations has led to our current child welfare system being widely described as "broken," sparking calls for it to be dismantled. The following sections describe how these three foundations, beginning with trauma-responsive approaches, will guide us in building a system that truly serves our families and communities.

Systems and services are grounded in Native Hawaiian values

A foundation in Native Hawaiian values and culture is essential to transforming our child welfare system. This imperative emerged consistently through the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group, Permitted Interaction Groups, and eleven community meetings. While this foundation directly addresses the critical issue of Native Hawaiian children's overrepresentation in the child welfare system, its benefits extend to all who call Hawaiʻi home.

This cultural grounding is not just aspirational—it is mandated by our laws: "Aloha Spirit Law requires state officials to give consideration to the values and meaning of the aloha spirit in their work" (HRS § 5-7.5). Additionally, the law of the splintered paddle, decreed by Kamehameha I, is embedded in our state constitution to provide for the safety of the people, especially the elderly, women, and children.

Traditional Values and Practices

The Kānaka and Poʻe Pasifika Permitted Interaction Group emphasized the need to recognize and re-establish ʻohana values that connect people to their lineage, culture, spirit, land, and water. Traditional concepts such as hānai and luhi (adoption or temporary care) must be acknowledged and respected. Moreover, traditional healing practices like hoʻoponopono should be offered alongside or integrated into other services.

Structural Changes and Implementation

To solidify this cultural foundation, several potential structural changes should be explored, including:

- Establishing a cultural court with cultural experts.
- Enacting laws that provide Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander families with protections similar to the federal Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA).
- Supporting Ka Piko, a coalition of community-based providers and safe spaces.

Grounding our child welfare system in Native Hawaiian values represents more than a cultural imperative—it is a pathway to more effective, equitable outcomes for all families in Hawaiʻi. Moving from aspiration to implementation requires sustained commitment to dedicated resources for comprehensive training, culturally grounded services, and a system that is more compatible with Hawaiian cultural values.

All interactions and services are grounded in a trauma-informed, culturally responsive approach

A trauma-responsive, culturally sensitive approach to families and children is the first critical foundation of our vision. The child welfare system, including all related systems and organizations, must integrate the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's six principles for a trauma informed approach into daily practice. The unique cultural make-up of Hawai'i requires not just a trauma-informed response, but one that is also culturally responsive.

This visual shows the six guiding principles to a trauma-informed approach

Benefits for Children and Families

The benefits of implementing trauma-informed practices extend to children, families, and the workforce alike. When families feel understood and supported rather than judged, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with services, leading to improved outcomes. Children, in particular, benefit from trauma-informed approaches as it helps them build secure attachments and learn adaptive coping skills, which are essential for positive development. Trauma-informed care not only aids in immediate crisis management but also facilitates long-term resilience, equipping children and families to thrive beyond the scope of the welfare system.

Supporting the Workforce

For the child welfare workforce, trauma-informed care fosters a more sustainable and supportive working environment. By understanding trauma and its effects, staff can approach their work with greater empathy and effectiveness, reducing burnout and compassion fatigue. Organizations that adopt trauma-informed practices provide their employees with the tools and training necessary to handle complex emotional challenges, which can enhance job satisfaction, increase retention, and create a more cohesive, mission-driven team.

Implementation Through Training

As part of its work to transform Hawai'i into a healing-centered and trauma-informed state, the Office of Wellness and Resilience will facilitate the provision of trauma-informed care and cultural sensitivity training for all staff of CWS, service providers, resource caregivers, and kinship care providers. Annual training on trauma-informed care will be required for all CWS staff and providers of Differential Response services.

Commit to an excellent workforce, sustainable, comprehensive funding for state agencies and contracted providers, and modern data systems

To reimagine our child welfare system, we must commit to excellence in every aspect of our system, including leadership, workforce, comprehensive funding, and technology.

Excellence in Workforce Development

To build an excellent workforce, we must invest in comprehensive professional development, competitive compensation, and supportive work environments. This includes implementing career advancement pathways, providing ongoing training opportunities, and maintaining a trauma-informed work environment that rewards excellence, addresses secondary trauma, and promotes family engagement and support.

Comprehensive and Sustainable Funding

State funding must fully cover all needed services and maximize federal matching funds. This requires a legislative commitment to prioritize children and families in the state budget by fully funding agencies and programs that keep families out of the child welfare system and by fully funding all parts of the child welfare system. To ensure sustainable funding, several strategies should be explored, including:

- Adding skilled financial and administrative personnel at the Department of Human Services tasked with optimizing federal revenue opportunities.
- Training all staff and contractors on documentation required to maximize funding.
- Providing modern, user-friendly technology to facilitate revenue maximization.
- Ensuring workloads and caseloads allow caseworkers, court staff, and medical providers to provide proper documentation.
- Establishing a dedicated child welfare and human services pod within the Governor's Federal Fund Team.

These strategies will support exploration of more effective ways to leverage diverse funding sources, including TANF, Title IV-B, Title IV-E, American Rescue Plan Act funds, Medicaid, and private funding. By implementing braided funding strategies that combine state, private, and federal resources, we can create a more robust and flexible financial foundation.

Procurement and Contract Management

Critical to this foundation is an overhaul of the procurement process and a commitment to *fully fund* contracted services. To ensure an ongoing commitment to child abuse prevention and system improvement, contracts for services that support families at risk of or involved with the child welfare system should include specific allocations for system-level work and child abuse prevention. The procurement process must be overhauled to encourage collaboration, and contracts must include flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances. State agencies must implement appropriate oversight to ensure effective and efficient use of resources.

Modern Data Systems and Technology

A modern child welfare system requires robust data infrastructure. Rapid implementation of a Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) is essential for improving case management, decision-making, and outcomes tracking.

This system should:

- Enable real-time data sharing between agencies
- Support mobile casework
- Provide advanced analytics capabilities
- Ensure compliance with federal reporting requirements
- Streamline documentation processes
- Facilitate better coordination of services.

C. Hawai'i HEARS: A New Bridge for Community Connections and Family Support

Reimagined Family Support System, Component 1

Our community listening sessions and working group discussions revealed a clear mandate: Hawai'i needs a robust, community-based structure that both upholds our transformed vision for child welfare and connects families with timely, effective support. This new entity, tentatively called Hawai'i HEARS (Help, Empower, Advocate, Reassure and Support), will serve as a vital bridge between (a) the community and state agencies, and (b) families and community resources.[5]

As the bridge between the community and state agencies, HEARS will create a dedicated hui that guides systemic change and upholds best practices, continuing the collaborative momentum of the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group.

As the bridge between families and community resources, HEARS will operate a warmline and provide information, referral, peer support, and brief navigation services to support families and connect them with resources.[5]

[5] While we use HEARS as the working name for this new entity, our community conversations yielded various suggestions, including OPEN (Office of Procedural Excellence and Navigation), and the final name remains open for discussion. More important than the name is the function of this new entity.

Establishing such an entity would create a monumental shift in Hawai'i's approach to child well-being:

- It signifies a shift to mandated supporting.
- Ensures that families facing severe economic hardship do not risk losing their children because they are poor.
- Relieves pressure on CWS because they would no longer be the default option when families are struggling.
- Provides a portal to services and supports designed to prevent family separation.

Prioritizing preventive support over intervention will reshape how Hawai'i nurtures and protects its keiki.

Establish a HEARS Hui to Guide Systemic Change and Best Practices

The transformation of Hawai'i's child welfare system requires sustained, collaborative effort beyond initial reforms. HEARS will host a hui to continue and expand upon the foundational work of the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group. This hui will address both immediate needs and systemic challenges through sustained, strategic action. While various structures were considered—including extending the working group or establishing a new commission—the critical element is creating a permanent infrastructure that ensures continued community voice, particularly from those with lived experience. The hui will ensure accountability, maintain momentum, and adapt strategies as needs evolve.

To guide ongoing transformation, the hui will:

- Center Community Wisdom and Collaboration
  - Continuously engage with and amplify voices of lived expertise
  - Facilitate regular collaboration among parents, youth, caregivers, service providers, and state agencies
  - Maintain strong partnerships between community organizations and government entities

- Drive Implementation and Innovation
  - Convene implementation teams to execute recommendations and action steps from this Report
  - Form research teams to further develop concepts presented in the vision
  - Design and track transformation milestones, including budget development and funding requests
  - Monitor and report on progress through annual legislative reports

- Address Systemic Barriers
  - Assess and map community needs against available resources
  - Advocate for adequate funding and contract reforms
  - Develop collaborative solutions to procurement and payment challenges
  - Create streamlined service coordination and referral processes
  - Establish metrics for evaluating service accessibility and effectiveness

Without this sustained infrastructure and support, we risk repeating history—where valuable recommendations, like those from the 1994 Child Welfare Services Reform Task Force, remain unimplemented.

Establish a warmline to support families and connect them with resources

The creation of a statewide warmline will fundamentally shift the experience of families with needs from being met by a culture of mandated reporting to being received into a culture of mandated supporting. In this new paradigm, all families experiencing challenges, whether identified through CWS reports or other channels, will receive timely, appropriate support designed to address their specific needs. CWS has become the default response to a wide spectrum of family challenges—from teen mental health crises to housing instability—despite not being equipped or designed to address many of these needs. **CWS should be the last resort, not the first response, when community members have concerns about child neglect.** The creation of HEARS fills a critical gap for Hawai'i families: the absence of an effective, accessible alternative for connecting families with appropriate support.[6]

This transformation requires both structural and philosophical changes in how individuals and institutions respond to families in need. It means:

- Creating clear pathways to support that don't require CWS involvement.
- Building community capacity to respond to family needs before they escalate.
- Developing a comprehensive network of preventive services and supports.
- Empowering mandated reporters with alternatives to CWS when children's immediate safety
  isn't at risk.
- Shifting public perception and professional training to prioritize early support over intervention.

The centralized warmline will be an alternative to and will coordinate with the child protective services hotline, offering families support before they require child protective services intervention. HEARS will implement a comprehensive, user-friendly intake and referral processes designed to connect families with appropriate services quickly and effectively. The intake process will include informing callers about their rights and responsibilities, including mandatory reporting laws, rights when interacting with CWS, and preventive legal services. While HEARS will provide some time-limited direct services, its primary role will involve facilitating warm hand-offs to organizations offering more extensive navigation assistance and direct services.

[6] The name "HEARS" was borrowed from New York, which in 2022, as part of a shift "toward a child and family well-being system, established a specialized parent and family resource support line (the HEARS Family Line, https://ocfs.ny.gov/programs/cwcs/hears.php) to provide support to parents and guardians.

Clarify Responsibility for Supporting Families

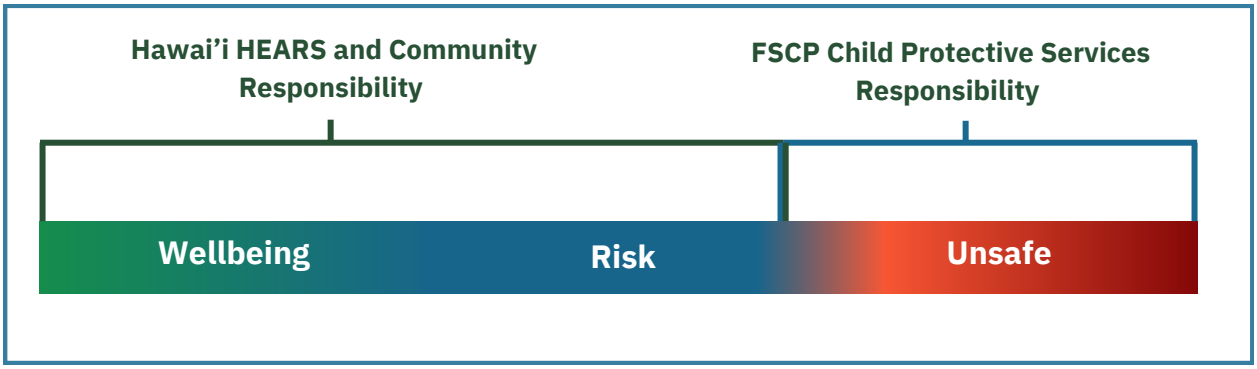
The creation of HEARS, with a warmline serving as a bridge to community services through a network of Ka Piko, will create transformative change in both mindset and service delivery. This signals a fundamental shift: families will receive support in their communities and not through a CWS case if children can be kept safe. Over time, calls to CWS will be reduced to those requiring CWS intervention. In 2022, approximately 20,600 reports were received, with approximately 6,000 assigned for intervention. CWS will be able to focus most resources on cases where a child is unsafe and harm has occurred or is imminent, currently about 4% of the reports made to the hotline.[7]

The Mālama ʻOhana Working Group is not suggesting that children be left unprotected. **We want children to be safe**, and we can keep them safe by building a better system that prioritizes prevention, family preservation, and cultural integrity. By investing in community-led solutions and dismantling the harmful structures of the current system, Hawai'i will create a model of care that truly honors the values of aloha, kuleana, and ʻohana while addressing the root causes of harm.

The data in Hawai'i and nationally shows that many family separations can be avoided without endangering safety. In Hawai'i, about 11% of children in foster care remain in care for one month or less[8] —if their safety can be assured within 30 days, might it be assured without any separation? A large body of research details the lasting trauma and harm caused by family separation, especially for youth who age out of foster care. That harm must be part of the analysis about what placement is the most safe for a child—at home, with relatives, or with strangers.

The success of this new approach will depend on Hawai'i developing and maintaining a robust array of community services designed to mitigate family risks, thus allowing children to safely remain at home while families receive support without CWS intervention. Appendix E provides more details about implementation of this different approach. Figure B illustrates the allocation of responsibility for supporting families between communities and Child Protective Services.

Figure B: Child wellbeing is a shared responsibility



[7]Hawaii DHS Social Services Division Annual APSR FFY 2024.

[8]Hawai'i Data Booklet, APSR FFY 2024, Figure 27, https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/ssd/files/2023/10/APSR-2024-Hawaii-Data-Booklet-FINAL-6-28-23.pdf.

D. Ka Piko or Family Resource Centers: Community Havens for Family Support

Reimagined Family Support System, Component 2

A statewide network of Ka Piko, or Family Resource Centers, will serve as community-based havens where parents, children, youth, and caregivers will access vital support. These supports will include information, resources, service referrals, and immediate concrete assistance such as food, clothing, and household supplies. To ensure maximum accessibility, Ka Piko will include both physical locations and virtual platforms, all with timely access to translation services.

Ka Piko will facilitate access to two levels of services:

- Universal supports so that all families will have the tools, knowledge, and support they need to provide safe, nurturing environments for their children.
- Intervention and treatment services for families experiencing more intense difficulties.

Ka Piko represents a shared community value that essential services must be readily accessible to families without requiring CWS involvement. These services will include mobile crisis response services, mental and physical health care, substance use disorder treatment, and intimate partner violence support services. When parents engage with these services in good faith, providers will work collaboratively with families and CWS to prevent separation unless children face immediate harm with no other options for keeping children safe at home.

The term "Ka Piko," meaning navel or umbilical cord in Hawaiian, carries deep cultural significance.

Developed by the Nā Kama a Hāloa working group, the concept of Ka Piko represents places where families can fulfill and sustain their needs. With further levels of definition, Ka Piko can refer to one's connection to the spirit and ancestors, to parents and the present community, and to the children and future generations. Communities have identified both formal and informal connections that serve as Ka Piko. This concept aligns with pu'uhonua, traditional places of refuge and healing.

Each Ka Piko will offer:

- Professional navigators who will provide time-limited support and case management until families address their immediate needs or achieve stability.
- Trained peer partners who will share lived experience, provide emotional support, and may serve as system navigators.
- Staff and volunteers who will be certified in trauma-informed care and Motivational Interviewing.
- Resources for economic and concrete support, including vouchers for cultural and health-promoting activities.
- Clear information about mandatory reporting laws, parent and children's rights in CWS interactions, and preventive legal services.

For Ka Piko to fulfill its role as places where families can meet and sustain their needs, Hawai'i must build and fund a universal primary prevention approach to supporting families, creating an environment in which children thrive. With political leadership and sustained resources, Hawai'i will implement comprehensive family support strategies ranging from universal home visiting and affordable childcare to housing assistance and economic supports. These services will be high quality, provided at no cost or on a sliding scale, geographically accessible throughout Hawai'i, and culturally responsive to our diverse communities.

Appendix E provides an overview of the service array available to support families and more details about pathways to access those services.

E. Reimagining Child Welfare Services: A New Model for Family Support and Child Protection

Reimagined Family Support System, Component 3

The transformation of Hawai'i's child welfare system requires a fundamental shift in how we conceptualize and deliver services. The current Child Welfare Services Branch (CWS) will be realigned and repurposed as the *Family Support and Child Protection Branch (FSCP),*[10] reflecting this dual commitment:

Provide family support whenever possible and ensure excellence when child protection is necessary.

This realignment acknowledges two essential truths that emerged from our community conversations. First, when child protection is needed, the response must be immediate, skilled, and unwavering in its pursuit of excellence—similar to an intensive care unit in a hospital. Second, most families who come to the attention of the current system need support services rather than protective intervention.

The transformed branch will have three core priorities:

- Administering Family First Hawai'i, which prevents family separation by connecting families with supportive services. This will be the work of the Family Support Services program.
- Providing exceptional services for the protection, care, and permanency of children who are unsafe in their homes. This will be the work of the Child Protective Services program.
- Developing and retaining an excellent workforce by fundamentally reimagining how the agency supports, trains, and retains staff.

[10] While we use FSCP as the working name for this transformed agency, our community conversations yielded various suggestions, and the final name remains open for discussion. What matters more than the name is the essential reimagining of the work.

In addition to these three core priorities, Family Support and Child Protection will maintain the existing child abuse and neglect reporting hotline while implementing crucial improvements to create seamless connections with HEARS. This redesigned system will ensure that every contact represents an opportunity for meaningful family support. The branch will also determine the optimal placement within the agency for critical administrative functions, including licensing, payments, compliance, program development, and other support activities.

This transformation must occur in tandem with the development of HEARS and community-based services. Success requires both internal excellence within Family Support and Child Protection and robust external support systems—they are interdependent parts of a single, cohesive system serving Hawai'i's families.

Family Support and Child Protection Branch Family Support Services

The Family Support and Child Protection Branch Family Support Services Program (Family Support Services) will administer Family First Hawai'i, leveraging federal Title IV-E funding to prevent unnecessary family separation. Our vision includes a robust array of services and anticipates that Title IV-E funds will pay for some of them. The Children's Bureau guidance allows this, and other states provide models for creating Community Pathways to connect families with economic and concrete supports and programs and services to prevent family separation.

As the state's Title IV-E agency, the Family Support and Child Protection Branch must determine eligibility for prevention services while contracting with community providers for service delivery. This administrative function is technical and critical to maximizing the amount of federal Title IV-E funding Hawai'i will access to provide families with services designed to prevent family separation.

Implementing the vision of a public-private partnership to prevent family separation requires several actions:

- Broaden the current definition of "candidate for foster care."
- Expand the number and type of services in the state's Title IV-E Prevention Plan.
- Develop a "Community Pathway" through partnerships with HEARS and community agencies to deliver economic and concrete supports and other programs and services to prevent family separation.

Additional study is needed before implementing these changes, as discussed in Appendix E.

Family Support and Child Protection Branch Child Protective Services

When child safety is at risk, the Family Support and Child Protection Branch Child Protective Services Program (Child Protective Services) will need to function with the urgency, precision, and excellence of an intensive care unit. This program will assess reports of child abuse and neglect where there are immediate safety concerns, provide in-home services when appropriate, manage out-of-home placements and related services when necessary to protect children's safety, and facilitate rapid permanency for children.

Child Protective Services will engage only with families where credible reports indicate actual or imminent harm. Current data supports this narrowed focus:

> less than 20% of reports to CWS receive a CWS response, and only 4% result in confirmed maltreatment findings.11 Many families currently investigated by CWS could safely keep their children at home if provided appropriate community-based services. [11]

By focusing exclusively on the most critical cases—those that cannot be resolved through less intrusive means—Child Protective Services workers will be able to conduct more thorough investigations and provide individualized support to all families in their care.

Family separation will be considered only after exhausting all less restrictive options. Through this transformation, Child Protective Services will function as a highly specialized unit—like an intensive care unit in a hospital—providing expert intervention only when absolutely necessary and maintaining the highest standards of excellence in those critical moments. This vision of excellence in child protection must be supported by a robust legal framework that sets clear, high standards for any decision to separate families, as discussed in Appendix E.

Child Protective Services will Provide Comprehensive Support

When Child Protective Services engages with a family, immediate access to support services will be crucial for all involved individuals. From the first contact, families will receive clear written and verbal information about available services and their rights and responsibilities. Services will be automatically available upon the opening of a child protection case, and with the exception of parent legal representation, which has financial eligibility criteria, all services will be provided at no cost to families.

[11] Hawaii DHS Social Services Division Annual APSR FFY 2024 (https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/ssd/files/2023/10/APSR-2024-Hawaii-Data-Booklet-FINAL-6-28-23.pdf).

This comprehensive support system will include the following, at a minimum:

- Family Connection and Communication
  - Unless explicitly prohibited by a judge, families will maintain frequent visits and ongoing contact, including immediate phone or video calls on the day of removal
  - Children will continue participating in their established school, spiritual, cultural, and community activities
  - Transportation assistance will support participation in all case-related activities and services
- Professional Support and Advocacy
  - Peer partners will be available for parents, children, and resource caregivers
  - Legal representation will be provided for parents and children
  - Guardians ad litem, who may also serve as legal counsel, will be assigned for children
- Health and well-being
  - Mental health services will be accessible to parents, children, and resource caregivers
  - Cultural supports, services, and activities will be available for all family members
  - Academic support and tutoring will be provided for children and youth
  - Childcare will be available to enable parent participation in child welfare proceedings and family service plan activities
- Information about rights and responsibilities will be provided to parents and youth over age ten, including:
  - How to access available supportive services, especially cultural and peer support
  - Preventive legal services
  - Parents' and children's rights during CWS interactions and court processes
  - Foster Youth Bill of Rights
  - Pono Process
  - Advocate for Children Youth and Families (if one exists)
  - Current policies regarding family contact if children must be removed
  - Location of Family Support and Child Protection Branch policies
  - Mandatory reporting laws

These supportive services will be provided through strategic collaborations among multiple partners, including HEARS, Office of Wellness and Resilience, Ka Piko, Crisis Response Services, Department of Education, the Judiciary, the Child Advocate (if one exists), and other community organizations. By ensuring comprehensive support from the outset, we will strengthen families' abilities to engage meaningfully with the child protection process while maintaining their connections to community and culture.

Additional suggestions for providing flexible, responsive services are discussed in Appendix E.

Support a healthy, highly skilled, and well-compensated workforce

The transformation of our child welfare system depends on fundamentally reimagining how we support, train, and retain our workforce.

Despite over a decade of specialized efforts and initiatives, workforce vacancies continue to challenge the system's effectiveness, compromising service quality and staff wellbeing. New strategies are needed, including the possibility of aligning workloads with available staffing capacity.

The first step will be to conduct a comprehensive organizational audit of the Department of Human Services to assess current strengths, challenges, and costs.

Let us be clear: The state cannot address the complex concerns facing our child welfare system simply by hiring more people.

If this were the solution to the problems surfaced through the working group process, this report would be unnecessary. Instead, we must fundamentally rethink our approach to supporting families. We must imagine the possibility of reducing the need for families to have caseworkers, lawyers, judges, and investigations. How might we shift to a system that supports families in communities and thereby reduces the resources we expend staffing existing agencies?

Simultaneously, we must focus on supporting workers in every agency of our child welfare system and attracting additional exceptional people. The workplace environment must model and foster the commitment, values, and mindset needed to achieve this transformative vision. Leadership, in particular, plays a crucial role in creating this culture. The items below present an outline of a vision for a healthy, highly skilled, well-compensated workforce.

Competitive Compensation

A transformed child welfare system will require compensation packages that reflect the complexity and emotional demands of this vital work. These packages must be competitive with the private sector and will need to include comprehensive health coverage that extends beyond traditional Western medicine. Importantly, staff will have access to mental health care during regular work hours, rather than requiring the use of personal time off, acknowledging that emotional wellbeing is essential to effective child welfare work.

Professional Development and Excellence

The Family Support and Child Protection Branch will partner with the Office of Wellness and Resilience, unions, and other stakeholders to develop comprehensive professional development pathways for all workers, including those providing Differential Response Services.

In developing these pathways, the following approaches could be explored:

- Creating a credentialing process that will measure proficiency in policy, process, and practice.
- Developing incentive structures for building and maintaining expertise.
- Establishing options for funding professional development opportunities, including conference attendance and advanced education, potentially linked to service commitments.
- Designing innovative ways to create positions for individuals with lived experience in the system.
- Implementing ongoing reflective supervision and coaching models.
- Developing diverse training modalities, including multilingual options.
- Integrating community engagement activities as part of professional growth.

Building Appropriate Staffing Structure

Building a sustainable workforce will require thoughtful attention to structure and capacity. This will include reassessing caseload limits, ensuring appropriate staffing levels across the agency, and maintaining dedicated teams for data management, analysis, and application. Continuous quality improvement processes in the Family Support and Child Protection Branch will monitor consistency in policy application, decision-making, and service allocation across sections, supervisors, and workers.

Through these comprehensive reforms, we will create a work environment that not only attracts and retains talented professionals but also supports their growth and wellbeing—ultimately leading to better outcomes for the families we serve.

F. Accountability and Transparency

Reimagined Family Support System, Component 4

Throughout our community discussions, participants loudly and consistently emphasized the imperative of accountability and transparency in the child welfare system overall, and especially in the child welfare services agency.

The wellbeing and safety of children is far too critical a function to tolerate practices that at best are ineffective and at worst cause harm.

Fulfilling our collective kuleana and being accountable to that kuleana requires the establishment of a mechanism for problem solving.

This vision includes an ombudsperson office as an essential mechanism for accountability. The ombudsperson will be independent of DHS and will have the authority to investigate and implement solutions at both individual and systemic levels. While other options were discussed, such as incorporating a grievance process and staff into an office called OPEN (Office of Procedural Excellence and Navigation), the ombudsperson model emerged as the preferred approach.

Additional strategies to promote accountability, transparency, and public trust in the system include:

- Making all current agency policies, procedures, and Internal Communication Forms (ICFs) publicly available on the internet.
- Ensuring strong advocacy for families, including through well-trained attorneys for children and parents.
- Systematically collecting, using, sharing, and learning from data.
- Conducting thorough reviews when tragedies occur to understand both individual and systemic factors that contributed to adverse events.
- Fostering greater community involvement through:
  - Service on advisory groups and boards
  - Continued participation in community convenings about the child welfare system
  - Active participation in the HEARS hui.
  - See Appendix E for further discussion of these strategies.

Establish an Ombudsperson office

Hawai'i will establish an independent Advocate for Children, Youth, and Families who will perform two critical functions that are essential for an accountable and transparent child welfare system: external system oversight and independent complaint resolution. Currently, no one in the state with specialized knowledge of child welfare systems is responsible for oversight of the system as a whole (including examining laws, policies, procedures, practices, and training), or for accepting, investigating, and addressing individual complaints or concerns. Children and families deserve to have these responsibilities carried out by an experienced professional with specialized knowledge of child welfare systems, supported by staff with specialized expertise.

The Child Advocate will serve as an ombudsperson, providing independent oversight of persons, organizations, and agencies responsible for providing services to or caring for children who are alleged or confirmed victims of child abuse and neglect or whose domestic situation requires intervention by the state.

The Advocate for Children, Youth, and Families must be external to and independent from the Department of Human Services. For more information about the powers and duties of the Child Advocate and supporting staff, see Appendix E.

G. Strengthen the Family Court Process for Child Welfare Cases

Reimagined Family Support System, Component 5

Strengthening the Family Court Process was not a specific focus of the working group, but it is a crucial component of the child welfare system. Throughout our community conversations, stakeholders consistently highlighted the need to examine and improve court processes in child welfare cases. While detailed recommendations will require further study and stakeholder input, several areas have emerged for examination.

Ensure Timely Court Proceedings

In our vision, child welfare cases will receive priority on family court calendars or will be heard in specialty courts with specific child welfare calendars. This approach will address concerns about delays in court proceedings negatively affecting both families and outcomes. The system will examine and address causes of delays, acknowledging that delays often stem from complex systemic issues, including attorney workloads and scheduling challenges. Statutory timelines for achieving permanency will also be reviewed—parents and others have said that these timelines are unrealistic, given delays and other barriers to accessing services and resources needed for reunification.

Ensure Excellence in Legal Representation

All parents and youth will have access to timely, high-quality legal representation. Without strong legal advocates, youth and parents' voices often go unheard in proceedings that profoundly affect their families. Our vision will build on steps Hawai'i has taken to provide parent representation. Sustainable career pathways with competitive compensation will be developed to encourage lawyers to practice in this area. Consistent, quality advocacy will be ensured through standards, training, and guidance on lawyers' roles and responsibilities in child welfare proceedings.

Current data from *Child Maltreatment 2022* raises questions about advocacy for children and youth: CWS reported that only 52.4% of maltreatment victims had court-appointed representatives (GALs, attorneys, or CASAs).[12] While this figure likely understates actual representation due to reporting issues, it highlights the need for better tracking and accountability to ensure every child has an effective advocate.

Relatives seeking to provide permanent homes for children will receive the legal help they need without experiencing undue financial burdens associated with legal proceedings related to adoption, guardianship, and related matters. While the Attorney General's office should handle many of these matters, reported delays and accessibility issues indicate the need for system improvements.

Enhance and Expand Specialty Court Programs

Effective specialty courts, such as Family Court Drug Courts, will provide a much-needed combination of legal oversight and comprehensive support services through a collaborative team approach. To ensure excellence in the Family Court specialty courts, information about the effectiveness and availability of existing specialty courts will be compiled and studied. The literature shows that these specialized courts can play a crucial role in supporting family reunification, but little public information is available about the benefits and challenges of these courts in Hawai'i.

[12] U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Administration on Children, Youth and Families, Children's Bureau. (2024). Child Maltreatment 2022, Table 6-5. Available from https://www.acf.hhs.gov/cb/data-research/child-maltreatment.

Implementation Strategies for Strengthening the Family Court Process

To ensure excellence in the Family Court Process, several strategies should be explored, including:

- Conduct a thorough assessment of current Family Court processes, including timeline analysis and identification of delay points.
- Create a right to counsel for youth involved with the child welfare system.
- Evaluate and improve the quality and consistency of legal representation for all parties.
- Develop solutions for reducing or eliminating legal costs for relative caregivers.
- Examine the resource needs and potential expansion of specialized court programs.
- Create better tracking systems for court-appointed representation.

Further exploration of the strengths and needs of the Family Court will involve all stakeholders —judges, attorneys, court staff, families, youth, and advocates—to ensure improvements truly serve the needs of families while upholding legal requirements and best practices.

H. Engage the Department of the Attorney General as a Key Partner in Transformation

Reimagined Family Support System, Component 6

The transformed child welfare system will require active partnership with the Department of the Attorney General in two critical areas:

1. Deputy Attorneys General (DAGs) represent the agency in child welfare proceedings.
2. The Department serves as a pivotal gatekeeper to an effective system that expansively supports children and families.

Vision for Legal Representation

DAGs will serve as specially trained, well-supported legal counsel for the child welfare agency in court and administrative proceedings. While the working group did not directly explore the role of DAGs, their expertise and support will be crucial to successful transformation as the legal counsel for the petitioning party in child welfare cases.

The Department of the Attorney General will play a pivotal role in implementing the transformed system. As adviser and gatekeeper, the Department will provide guidance to DHS on policy development and implementation, proposed legislation, procurement processes, contracts for services, administrative rules, youth right to counsel, allocation of funds for concrete supports, public access to records and policies, and creating public-private partnerships through MOUs.

Additional exploration will be needed to understand how the Department of the Attorney General can best support the reimagined Hawai'i Family Support System.

I. Secure Political Leadership and Commitment

Reimagined family support system, Component 7

State Representatives, Senators, the Governor, and the Lt. Governor have extraordinary power in determining the parameters of the child welfare system in terms of funding, laws, staffing, and administrative rules. Agencies comprising the child welfare system must operate according to the laws that bind them, and the resources allocated to them.

Political will and funding are fundamental to creating a society that puts into practice the assertion that children are valued. Past reform efforts have failed due to a lack of political leadership and sustained resources. As recommended by the Hui Hoʻopūlama Permitted Interaction Group, we must "seek commitment from public state leaders (e.g., the Governor, the Legislature, the Executive Branch, and the Judiciary) and communities to build a system that supports our families so that families thrive and children are safe."

Our comprehensive vision requires political leaders to allocate funds, political capital, and public resources toward maintaining an environment that promotes thriving communities, families, and children. Our leaders must vigilantly monitor the system, track funding expenditures, and participate in implementation. Each of the five recommendations of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group can be accomplished with commitment from the House, the Senate, the Governor, and the Lt. Governor.

We completed the task you gave us: "develop recommendations to establish a child welfare system that is trauma-informed, sustains a community-based partnership, and responds to the needs of children and families in the system and the community." We now call upon you to support and fund implementation of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group recommendations:

1. Acknowledge and address historical and present conditions and barriers that perpetuate the overrepresentation of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Island people in categories of need or distress.
2. Prioritize thriving families above all other Hawaiʻi commitments by providing universal family supports.
3. Provide accessible, trauma-responsive, specialized supports and interventions outside the child welfare system for parents facing intense challenges.
4. When CWS intervenes in a family, ensure that the intervention is respectful and supportive, minimizes trauma, and does not create more harm than the original issue they hoped to address.
5. Ensure that systems, services, processes, and procedures are coordinated, accountable, and efficient with robust oversight, adequate funding, appropriate staffing, and high operational standards.

Photo Credit: Kiʻi Kalo Photography

VII. Holo I Mua

A. Our call to action

How shall we holo i mua (progress, advance, surpass) together to transform our approach to supporting families and protecting children? We owe it to our keiki and 'ohana to create lasting, positive change. This transformation requires coordinated action across all branches of government and sustained community engagement.

The next phase of this work demands active engagement from the House, Senate, Governor, and Lt. Governor with the working group and community members to develop and execute a thoughtful, sustainable implementation plan. Success requires the allocation of funds, political capital, and public resources to transform our systems.

Photo Credit: Ki'i Kalo Photography

B. Immediate Priority

An urgent and immediate need exists for the Legislature and Governor to allocate funding and authority to the Office of Wellness and Resilience to continue the work started through the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group and shift efforts from planning to implementation.

C. The Legislature's Role

In the 2025 legislative session, the Legislature should pass comprehensive bills to implement the working group's five recommendations. This requires allocating sufficient funds to enable the Office of Wellness and Resilience to facilitate system transformation, fully implement changes contained in passed bills, and support state agencies in implementing administrative changes. Additionally, the Legislature should establish study committees to gather information for the 2026 legislative session.

D. Executive Branch Leadership

The Department of Human Services must elevate the urgency of identified problems while demonstrating commitment through concrete actions and funding requests. Immediate implementation of changes within the agency's current authority should begin while maintaining continued collaboration with state and community partners. The Department must actively seek technical assistance from local and national experts and submit comprehensive funding requests through both the Governor's administrative package and direct legislative channels for fiscal year 2025 and beyond.

The Governor and Lt. Governor are called upon to use their full executive authority to support and facilitate system transformation. This includes prioritizing these initiatives in the state's overall strategic planning and budgeting processes, while ensuring coordination across all executive agencies involved in family support services.

E. Partner Agencies' Responsibilities

The Department of the Attorney General, the Judiciary, and the Department of Health must engage meaningfully with this report and collaborate with working group and community members to develop implementation strategies. These agencies should support legislative initiatives and Department of Human Services transformation efforts while implementing recommendations within their current authority and resources. They must submit necessary funding requests for fiscal year 2025 and beyond through appropriate channels. Additionally, they should actively seek technical assistance and funding from local and national experts to support implementation efforts.

F. Community Engagement

The success of this transformation depends on continued community involvement. Community members must remain actively engaged in creating a reimagined family support system. Their role includes providing ongoing feedback and guidance during the implementation process and holding elected officials accountable for implementing the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group recommendations. Community voices will remain essential in shaping and refining these initiatives as they move from concept to reality.

G. Our Path Forward

This transformation requires sustained commitment from all stakeholders. As we holo i mua together, we have an unprecedented opportunity to create lasting positive outcomes for our keiki and 'ohana. While implementing these recommendations will require courage, dedication, and collaboration across all sectors of our community, we have already built the foundation through the work of the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group. **The time for bold action is now.**

We do not want to repeat the history of other task forces and working groups. The recommendations from the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group include the eight primary recommendations that were issued by the 1994 Child Welfare Services Reform Task Force thirty years ago. Some of the strategies to implement the recommendations are different in 2024 than they were in 1994, and some are exactly the same. For example, "ensure that the system is well-managed with highly competent and committed individuals" and "respect and work with the child as part of a family and with the family as part of a community" were recommended then and are needed now.

Thirty years from now, in 2054, how will we answer the question "How are the children?" By responding to the urgent needs of today and building a system that will truly mālama ʻohana, we will confidently answer, "They are thriving."

VIII. Appendices

A. Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Members

Name	Seat	Organization
Laurie Tochiki (Co-chair)	Co-chair	EPIC 'Ohana
Venus Rosete-Medeiros (Co-chair)	Co-chair	Hale Kipa
Amanda Mundon	Kinship resource caregiver	EPIC 'Ohana
April Lum	Licensed resource caregiver	Community member
Chiemi Davis	Lili'uokalani Trust Designee	Lili'uokalani Trust
Daisy Hartsfield	DHS Director Designee	DHS Social Services Division (SSD)
Elladine Olevao	DHS Child Welfare Services Branch	DHS Child Welfare Services Branch
Kacie Lambert	Former foster youth	EPIC 'Ohana and HI HOPES Youth Leadership Board
Ka'ano'i Walk	Kamehameha Schools Designee	Kamehameha Schools
Kailene Nihipali-Sanchez	Kinship resource caregiver	EPIC 'Ohana
Kayla Samson	Birth parent	EPIC 'Ohana
Kimberly Nabarro	Birth parent	EPIC 'Ohana
Lisa Rapozo	DHS Child Welfare Services Branch	DHS Child Welfare Services Branch (Kaua'i)
Melissa Mayo	Former foster youth	EPIC 'Ohana and HI HOPES Youth Leadership Board
Paul Tonnessen	Licensed resource caregiver	Friends of the Children's Justice Center of Maui
Scott Shimabukuro	Trauma-Informed Care Task Force	DOH Child & Adolescent Mental Health Division (CAMHD)
Stacy Ferreira	Office of Hawaiian Affairs	Office of Hawaiian Affairs

Calendar of Mālama ʻOhana Community Meetings

DATE	TIME	REGION	LOCATION	RSVP
WEDNESDAY MAY 29	5:30-8P	WAIʻANAE, OʻAHU	KS KALANIHOʻOKAHA LEARNING CENTER 89-102 FARRINGTON HWY, WAIANAE	bit.ly/Waianae_MOWG_RSVP
FRIDAY MAY 31	5:30-8P	HILO, HAWAIʻI	KEAUKAHA ELEMENTARY CAFETERIA 240 DESHA AVE, HILO	bit.ly/Hilo_MOWG_RSVP
THURSDAY JUNE 6	5:30-8P	MOLOKAʻI	OHA CONFERENCE, KULANA ʻOIWI HALAU 600 MAUNALOA HIGHWAY, KALAMAʻULA	bit.ly/Molokai_MOWG_RSVP
MONDAY JUNE 10	5:30-8P	KAHULUI, MAUI	UNIVERSITY OF HAWAIʻI AT MAUI COLLEGE STUDENT LOUNGE, PILINA BUILDING 2ND FLOOR 310 W. KAʻAHUMANU AVE. KAHULUI	bit.ly/Maui_MOWG_RSVP
FRIDAY JUNE 14	6-8P	HĀNA, MAUI	ZOOM FOR HĀNA COMMUNITY	bit.ly/Hāna_MOWG_virtual
TUESDAY JUNE 18	5:30-8P	KAILUA-KONA, HI	KONA INTERNATIONAL MARKETPLACE (MAKAI WAREHOUSE) 74-5533 LUHIA ST. KAILUA-KONA	bit.ly/Kona_MOWG_RSVP
TUESDAY JUNE 25	5:30-8P	LIHUE, KAUAI	WAR MEMORIAL CONVENTION HALL 4191 HARDY ST, LIHUE	bit.ly/Kauai_MOWG_RSVP
THURSDAY JUNE 27	6-8P	LĀNAʻI	ZOOM FOR LĀNAʻI COMMUNITY	bit.ly/Lanai_MOWG_virtual
FRIDAY JUNE 28	5:30-8P	WAIMĀNALO, OʻAHU	BLANCHE POPE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL CAFETERIA 41-133 HULI STREET, WAIMĀNALO,	bit.ly/Waimanalo_MOWG_RSVP
MONDAY JULY 1	5:30-8P	WAHIAWĀ, OʻAHU	WAHIAWĀ ELEMENTARY 1402 GLEN AVE, WAHIAWA	bit.ly/Wahiawa_MOWG_RSVP
TUESDAY JULY 2	6-8P	STATEWIDE	STATEWIDE ZOOM FOR THOSE WHO ARE UNABLE TO ATTEND IN PERSON	bit.ly/Statewide_MOWG_virtual

C. Appreciations

The Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Support Team and Community Partners

- First Lady Jamie Green
- Lt. Gov. Sylvia Luke
- Andrea Dias-Machado
- Anela Ryan
- Anu Getgen
- Chassidy Shinno
- Dana Matsunami
- Delia Ulima
- Denise Clark
- Hawai'i Children's Action Network
- Jessica Kaneakua
- Jodie Burgess
- Karen Worthington
- Kāwika Riley
- Keala Kaopuiki-Santos
- Kristen Collins
- Lise Vaughan-Sekona
- Mitchell Odo
- Noreen Kohl
- Office of Wellness and Resilience
- One Shared Future team
- Puanani Hee
- Rachael Wong
- Rachel Nunies
- Sabrina Sawyer
- Samantha U'u
- Tia Hartsock
- Tianna Webster
- Will Ana

Community meeting locations and kōkua

Community meeting locations

- Waiʻanae, Oʻahu: Kamehameha Schools Kalaniho'okaha Learning Center in Nānākuli
- Hilo, Hawai'i Island: Keaukaha Elementary
- Kaunakakai, Moloka'i: Office of Hawaiian Affairs Conference at Kulana Oiwi Complex
- Kahului, Maui: University of Hawai'i Maui College Pilina Center
- Kona, Hawai'i Island: Lili'uokalani Trust Kipuka Kona
- Lihui, Kaua'i: War Memorial Convention Hall
- Waimānalo, Oʻahu: Blanche Pope Elementary School
- Wahiawā, Oʻahu: Wahiawa Elementary
- By Zoom: Hāna, Lāna'i, Statewide

Community meeting kōkua

- Amy Peruso, State Representative, House District 46
- Della Au Belatti, State Representative, House District 26
- Eden Carney, Kamehameha Schools
- Lisa Marten, State Representative, House District 51
- Kelly Maltezo
- Kim Rivera, Hale Kipa
- Malani DeAguair
- Po'o Kahu Shaun Wilcox
- Sharla Ann Fujimoto
- Titi Hernandez, Moloka'i Child Abuse Prevention Pathways
- Tracy Murakami
- Childcare provided by INPEACE and many other organizations and individuals

Legislators who sponsored or supported bills to create the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group

Senators who Introduced SB295:

- Henry Aquino
- Stanley Chang
- Donovan Dela Cruz
- Dru Kanuha
- Gilbert Keith-Agaran
- Michelle Kidani
- Chris Lee
- Angus McKelvey
- Sharon Moriwaki
- Karl Rhoads
- Hebert "Tim" Richards, III
- Glenn Wakai

Senators who introduced SB1211

- Joy San Buenaventura
- Stanley Chang
- Lorraine Inouye
- Donna Kim

Representatives who introduced companion bill HB 330

- Terez Amato
- Elle Cochran
- Troy Hashimoto
- Nicole Lowen
- Lisa Marten
- Adrian Tam
- Chris Todd

2023 Keiki Caucus Members

Co-conveners

- Lisa Marten
- John Mizuno
- Amy Perruso

House members

- Terez Amato
- Cory Chun
- Elle Cochran
- Sonny Ganaden
- Diamond Garcia
- Andrew Garrett
- Cedric Gates
- Natalia Hussey-Burdick
- Linda Ichiyama
- Kirsten Kahaloa
- Jeanne Kapela
- Nicole Lowen
- Mahina Poepoe
- Jackson Sayama
- Gregg Takayama
- Jenna Takenouchi
- Adrian Tam
- Jimmy Tokioka
- Gene Ward

Senate members

- Mike Gabbard
- Dru Kanuha
- Donna Mercado Kim
- Karl Rhoads

Financial Support

The Mālama ʻOhana Working Group was established but not funded by the 2023 Hawaiʻi state legislature. To accomplish the work, we secured $250,000 from Kamehameha Schools, Hawaiʻi Community Foundation, Casey Family Programs, the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Friends of the Children's Justice Center of Maui. All of the funds were used to pay for the services of One Shared Future, and for all of the expenses relating to hosting the on-site community meetings throughout the state. Working Group members were not compensated for their time, and did receive reimbursement for travel expenses. However, many Working Group members did not seek reimbursement. In addition, countless hours of support and in-kind contributions were received. We are especially grateful for the uncompensated support from the Office of Wellness and Resilience, EPIC ʻOhana, Hawaii Children's Action Network, and Hale Kipa.

C. Process and Methodology

Overview of the process

Statutory Purpose

The legislative purpose stated in Act 86[13] recites the concerns that led to the proposal of a working group, and give a clear charge to the working group, leading to the completion of this report. Specifically, the Act states that:

> "The legislature finds that the problems faced by children and families in the State's child welfare system are extremely complex and cannot be resolved by the department of human services alone. The legislature further finds that, to address and resolve these diverse and multi-faceted problems, the State must work with the community and various stakeholders to determine where the core infrastructure is failing."

Further, the Act requires the working group "to seek, design, and recommend transformative changes to the State's existing child welfare system."

"The Mālama 'Ohana working group shall develop recommendations to establish a child welfare system that is trauma-informed, sustains a community-based partnership, and responds to the needs of children and families in the system and the community."

The method of the work was also set forth in Act 86:

"In fulfilling its purpose, the working group shall:

1. Conduct informational meetings throughout the State with affected constituencies;
2. Convene meetings to develop recommendations to better coordinate and improve the protection and well—being of children and families in the State's child welfare system;
3. Identify training, best practices, assessment criteria, and methods to sustain an effective workforce within the child welfare services branch and within the larger circle of community agencies serving the child welfare system;
4. Identify best practices, including Native Hawaiian cultural practices, to assist children and youth who are involved in the child welfare system and their families;
5. Identify other cultural practices that build wellness and resilience in communities and collaboration between communities and the Child welfare services branch; and
6. Collaborate with the trauma—informed care task force, and, where appropriate, conduct joint informational meetings."

[13] Act 86, Hawai'i. Session Laws 2023.

Sunshine Laws Governed the Process

The Hawaii Sunshine Law (Haw. Rev. Stat. § 92-1 et seq.) governed the working group's activities, but some of its requirements inadvertently made our work more difficult. The law's strict agenda requirements meant we couldn't discuss new issues that naturally emerged during public testimony, even when closely related to our posted agenda items.

Our community listening sessions posed particular challenges. When fewer than a quorum of working group members attended these sessions, the complex rules around public testimony and Permitted Interaction Groups limited open dialogue rather than encouraged it.

To make use of Permitted Interaction Groups, we needed to hold **three separate meetings** in sequence: first to create the group and set its scope, then to hear its findings, and finally to discuss and act on those findings. We created two rounds of Permitted Interaction Groups to support our participatory research approach. Between the working group meeting to create them and the working group meeting at which they presented their findings, each Permitted Interaction Group conducted substantial research - holding four to eight meetings, conducting key stakeholder interviews, and in some cases making site visits. While our timeline of September 2023 to November 2024 might seem long, fitting in these intensive research periods along with the required three-meeting sequence for each Permitted Interaction Group was challenging. Sometimes we had to add extra working group meetings just to discuss and act on Permitted Interaction Group recommendations before moving forward with our next phase of work.

Designed Alliance

The working group's interactions and processes were guided by our Designed Alliance. The diversity of our membership provided an opportunity to model the kind of collaborative, solution-focused process we want to see in our child welfare system. The Designed Alliance, a statement of intent and values to guide our interactions, was read and affirmed at every meeting.

The working group was formed so that half the members are individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system. Former foster youth, birth parents, relatives, resource caregivers are represented by individuals with recent child welfare involvement, but not a current open case.

To identify working group members, we looked for individuals whose time could be compensated through their employment since Act 86 was not funded, and members could not be compensated except for travel expenses. We reached out to groups and individuals who had testified during the two legislative sessions leading up to Act 86. Our intent was that the conversations and work would include those members of the community committed to this work, even if they were not named members of the working group. We also included three members directly representing the Native Hawaiian perspective. Government representatives had a seat at the table as part of the collaborative process, and theirs was a minority voice.

Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Designed Alliance

To create a shared, safe space where we can interact and generate meaningful ideas and recommendations, we agree to stay engaged in the following ways:

- **Commit** to achieving our Working Group's goals
- **Live our values** of honesty, respect, inclusion, aloha, empathy, equity of voice, value of lived experience, and haʻahaʻa (humility), and kindness
- **Assume good intent**, listen deeply, seek first to understand, focus on solutions, avoid blame, and take responsibility
- **Nurture** a trauma-informed, growth mindset, and positive culture of safety, respect, confidentiality, boundary respect, hope, curiosity, learning, and transformation
- **Respect** others' experiences in how they are sharing, stay out of judgment, and look to ʻike kūpuna (ancestral knowledge) as a source of guidance
- **Support each other** in being bold and courageous, vulnerable, honest, heard, mindful, intentional, empowered, comfortable and uncomfortable, stretched, and mākaukau (ready)
- **Cultivate aloha** for one another and connectedness to each other and our communities

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Affirmed on 10/16/23

Figure: The "Designed Alliance" – A collaboratively developed statement of intent and shared values that guided our interactions. This document was read and reaffirmed at the start of every meeting to ensure clarity, alignment, and mutual respect.

The working group acknowledged that opinions and concerns about our work are often conflicted, and we hoped that we could model the kind of collaborative and focused discussions required for system transformation. The need to model this kind of problem solving was so important that we intentionally worked on a statement of how we would operate, believing that this foundation would be important moving forward. The group developed the Designed Alliance with input from community members who attended meetings, contributing through oral sharing, Zoom chat, and a Google Form between meetings. This statement of intent and values was agreed upon by the working group, and reinforced at every meeting, including the listening sessions in the communities. Everyone in the sessions, including the public, was asked to affirm the Designed Alliance, which states:

To create a shared, safe space where we can interact and generate meaningful ideas and recommendations, we agree to stay engaged in the following ways:

- Commit to achieving our Working Group's goals
- Live our values of honesty, respect, inclusion, aloha, empathy, equity of voice, value of lived experience, and ha'aha'a (humility), and kindness
- Assume good intent, listen deeply, seek first to understand, focus on solutions, avoid blame, and take responsibility
- Nurture a trauma-informed, growth mindset, and positive culture of safety, respect, confidentiality, boundary respect, hope, curiosity, learning, and transformation
- Respect others' experiences in how they are sharing, stay out of judgment, and look to 'ike kūpuna (ancestral knowledge) as a source of guidance
- Support each other in being bold and courageous, vulnerable, honest, heard, mindful, intentional, empowered, comfortable and uncomfortable, stretched, and mākaukau (ready)
- Cultivate aloha for one another and connectedness to each other and our communities

Research approach

The Mālama 'Ohana Working Group employed a community-based participatory research methodology, centering the voices and experiences of those most impacted by the child welfare system. This approach ensured that individuals with lived experience were not merely subjects of research but active participants in designing the inquiry, gathering data, and formulating recommendations.

The research process included multiple channels for data collection: 11 community meetings across the state (223 community members in total), two rounds of Permitted Interaction Groups, an online survey that garnered 81 responses, and ongoing opportunities for public testimony at every meeting. In the first round, Permitted Interaction Groups established research parameters and developed questions for deeper investigation. The second round conducted intensive research through stakeholder interviews, site visits, and focused group discussions. Six Permitted Interaction Groups in total contributed to the comprehensive data collection effort.

The working group also implemented an iterative feedback process during report development. Three drafts of the report were publicly posted and presented at meetings in October and November, with multiple channels for community input including a Google form, email submissions, and public testimony. This approach allowed for continuous refinement based on community feedback.

Data collection emphasized qualitative methods, prioritizing personal narratives and lived experiences from diverse perspectives including former foster youth, birth parents, resource caregivers, and community stakeholders. The process was facilitated by One Shared Future, which helped ensure consistent application of trauma-informed practices and adherence to the group's Designed Alliance principles throughout the research process.

The participatory approach allowed the working group to gather rich, contextual data while modeling the collaborative, solution-focused process envisioned for the transformed child welfare system. This methodology aligned with the legislative mandate to seek transformative changes through community engagement and stakeholder participation.

Analysis Framework and Emerging Themes

The working group's analysis evolved through several structured phases to systematically process and synthesize the extensive qualitative data collected. All data from this process, including Permitted Interaction Group recommendations, survey results, draft feedback, and formal comments and recommendations, are included in appendices or available online at malamaohana.net.

To ensure comprehensive representation of different perspectives and experiences within the child welfare system, the working group established six Permitted Interaction Groups, each focused on a specific constituency or area of concern:

- Keiki & ʻŌpio (Children & Youth)
- Mākua & ʻOhana (Parents & Family)
- Lawe Hānai (Caregivers)
- Hui Kaiāulu (Community Supports)
- Hui Hoʻopūlama (Systems Supports)
- Kanaka & Po'e Pasifika (Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders)

Community meetings were structured around **three key inquiries**, asking participants to complete the following statements through written responses, verbal testimony, or the online survey:

- The Strengths of the Child Welfare System are...
- The Needs of the Community are...
- My Hope for the Child Welfare System is...

Through iterative analysis of the collected data, the working group identified five primary themes that were presented at the August 19 ʻAha Mālama ʻOhana:

1. Prevention
2. Trauma-Informed Systems
3. Accountability and Transparency
4. Creating a Family-serving / Family Support System
5. Cultural and Indigenous Practices

These themes ultimately informed the working group's five recommendations and vision for system transformation, representing a synthesis of the diverse perspectives and experiences shared throughout the research process.

Challenges and Gaps

The working group as established by the legislature attempted to hold open and courageous conversations throughout the state, and to uplift the voices of those with lived experience. We wanted to be as intentional and open and safe as we could be to have people share openly. Parents and family members, especially those with current open cases were concerned about retaliation for speaking up. We had to be creative to foster an open dialogue while abiding by the interpretation of the Hawai'i state sunshine law. For instance, no more than two members of the working group are allowed to discuss any aspect of the concerns raised in our work, except as a part of an agendized topic in a public hearing or as a part of a Permitted Interaction Group. When comments from the public were made, we were aware that the working group could not respond or move the discussion to more of a conversation, because the topics may not have been agendized.

Secondly, our emphasis was on the voices of lived experience and the community. Therefore, input from the official "system actors" such as administrators, attorneys, and judges was minimal. This report is not meant to be an analysis or audit of data. Our data is lived experience. Each person's story is that person's truth. Often there is a discrepancy between written policies and consistent implementation or interpretation. Thus, those with lived experience report needs, concerns or hurts that have been addressed in policy, but have not been implemented. Also, the stories that we heard ranged from current, open cases, to stories from adults about their childhood years ago. There are current initiatives in CWS that may help to alleviate some of the concerns raised in this report, but those initiatives are not reflected here. In other words, some of our recommendations may already be in design or implementation by CWS, but not fully implemented so as to be reflected in the experiences of the community.

Permitted Interaction Groups Members - Round 1

Hui Hoʻopūlama (Systems Supports) –Round 1

Chair: Laurie Tochiki, EPIC ʻOhana

Participants

1. Chiemi Davis (Liliʻuokalani Trust)
2. Daisy Hartsfield (Dept. of Human Services)
3. Genia Stith (Stop the Violence)
4. Jackie Hong (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
5. Jessi Hall (Judiciary)
6. Ka'ano'i Walk (Kamehameha Schools)
7. Kelly Sim (Casey Family Programs)
8. Laura Brucia Hamm (Hale Kipa)
9. Laura Miller (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
10. Marty Oliphant (Liliʻuokalani Trust)
11. Mele Andrade (Hawaiʻi Children's Action Network)
12. Nonohe Botelho(Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
13. Peggy Hong (family member)
14. Sharon Simms (consultant)
15. Shana Kukila (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
16. Stacy Ferreira (Office of Hawaiian Affairs)

Support Team:

1. Dana Matsunami, National Center for Youth Law
2. Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC ʻOhana
3. Noreen Kohl, Hawaiʻi Children's Action Network

Hui Kaiāulu (Community Supports) –Round 1

Chair: Kailene Nihipali Sanchez, EPIC ʻOhana

Participants

1. April Lum (Dept. of Education)
2. Elladine Olevao (Child Welfare Services)
3. Ka'ano'i Walk (Kamehameha Schools)
4. Kimberly Nabarro (Lived expert, EPIC 'Ohana)
5. Laura Miller (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
6. Laurie Tochiki (EPIC 'Ohana)
7. Nonohe Botelho (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
8. Shana Kukila (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)

Support Team:

- Dana Matsunami, National Center for Youth Law
- Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC ʻOhana
- Noreen Kohl, Hawaiʻi Children's Action Network

Kanaka & Po'e Pasifika (Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders) —Round 1

Chair: Stacy Ferreira, Office of Hawaiian Affairs

Participants

1. Jackie Hong (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
2. Ka'ano'i Walk (Kamehameha Schools)
3. Kailene Nihipali Sanchez (EPIC 'Ohana)
4. Kai Markell (Office of Hawaiian Affairs)
5. Ke'ōpū Reelitz (Office of Hawaiian Affairs)
6. Lisi Ferguson (Stop the Violence)
7. Nonohe Botelho (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
8. Puafisi Tupola (Dept. of Human Services)
9. Shana Kukila (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
10. Venus Rosete-Medeiros (Hale Kipa)

Support Team:

- Dana Matsunami, National Center for Youth Law
- Keala Kaopuiki-Santos, Office of Wellness and Resilience
- Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC ʻOhana

Keiki & ʻŌpio (Children & Youth) —Round 1

Chair: Melissa Mayo, EPIC ʻOhana

Participants

1. Candice Kirby
2. Carla Houser (RYSE Hawaii)
3. Dana Matsunami (National Center for Youth Law)
4. Elizabeth Trest (University of Hawaii)
5. Joshua Franklin (Lived expertise with CW system)
6. Kacie Lambert (Lived expertise with CWS System)
7. Kayla Samson (EPIC 'Ohana)
8. Lisa Rapozo (Dept. of Human Services)
9. Lynne Kazama (Dept. of Human Services)
10. Nonohe Botelho (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
11. Scott Shimabukuro (Dept. of Health)

Support Team:

- Dana Matsunami, National Center for Youth Law
- Keala Kaopuiki-Santos, Office of Wellness and Resilience
- Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC ʻOhana

Lawe Hānai (Caregivers) —Round 1

Chair: Paul Tonnessen, Friends of the Children's Justice Center of Maui

Participants

1. Amanda Mundon (EPIC 'Ohana)
2. April Lum (Dept. of Education)
3. Jenna Oda
4. Joshua Franklin (Lived expertise with CW system)
5. Kailene Nihipali Sanchez (EPIC 'Ohana)
6. Keala Kaopuiki-Santos (Office of Wellness and Resilience)
7. Laurie Tochiki (EPIC 'Ohana)
8. Nonohe Botelho (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
9. Shana Kukila (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)

Support Team:

- Dana Matsunami, National Center for Youth Law
- Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC 'Ohana

Mākua & 'Ohana (Parents & Family) —Round 1

Chair: Venus Rosete-Medeiros, Hale Kipa

Participants

1. Amanda Mundon (EPIC 'Ohana)
2. Godwin Higa
3. Heidi Allencastre (Family Hui Hawaii)
4. Joshua Franklin (Lived expertise with CW system)
5. Kayla Samson (EPIC 'Ohana)
6. Kimberly Nabarro (Lived expert, EPIC 'Ohana)
7. Laura Miller (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
8. Marilyn Yamamoto (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
9. Melissa Mayo (EPIC 'Ohana)
10. Nonohe Botelho (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
11. Shana Kukila (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)

Support Team:

1. Dana Matsunami, National Center for Youth Law
2. Keala Kaopuiki-Santos, Office of Wellness and Resilience
3. Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC 'Ohana

Permitted Interaction Groups Members – Round 2

Hui Hoʻopūlama (Systems Supports) —Round 2

Chair: Laurie Tochiki, EPIC ʻOhana

Participants

1. Andrew Park (Judiciary)
2. Caelan O'Meara (Judiciary)
3. Chiemi Davis (Liliʻuokalani Trust)
4. Dayna Miyasaki (Judiciary)
5. Elladine Olevao (Child Welfare Services)
6. Jackie Hong (Lived expertise with CWS System)
7. Joshua Franklin (Lived expertise with CWS system)
8. Kacie Lambert (Lived expertise with CWS System)
9. Karen Worthington (Certified Child Welfare Law Specialist)
10. Kūʻikeokalani "Kūʻike" Kamakea-ʻŌhelo (Office of Hawaiian Affairs)
11. Laura Miller (Lived expertise, Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
12. Matthew Viola (Judiciary)
13. McKenzie Gallagher
14. Moani Muna (Lived expertise with CWS System)
15. Peggy Hong (Lived expertise with CWS System)
16. Shana Wailana Kulila (Lived expertise with CWS System)
17. Stacy Ferreira (Office of Hawaiian Affairs)
18. Vanessa Corwin (Advocate)

Support Team:

1. Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC ʻOhana
2. Noreen Kohl, Hawaiʻi Children's Action Network

Meeting Frequency & Format:

Five virtual 1.5 hour meetings open to all Permitted Interaction Group members and participants (via Zoom) and 7 interviews

Hui Kaiāulu (Community Supports) —Round 2

Chair: Kailene Nihipali Sanchez, EPIC ʻOhana

Participants

1. Alice Caudil
2. Andi Sabanal (Lived expert)
3. Angela Hopfe-Cruz (Dept. of Education)
4. April Lum (Dept. of Education)
5. Corinna Sosa (EPIC ʻOhana)
6. Courtney Dumlao (Child & Family Service)
7. Daniel Ho (EPIC ʻOhana)
8. Daysha Morris (Lived expert)
9. Deonne Carden (Hoʻomalu Shelter)
10. Elladine Olevao (Child Welfare Services)
11. Judina Haus (Child & Family Service Maui)
12. Kaʻanoʻi Walk (Kamehameha Schools)
13. Kahea Souza (Parents and Children Together, Lived expert)
14. Kelly Sim (Casey Family Programs)
15. Kimberly Nabarro (Lived expert, EPIC ʻOhana)
16. Kukuna Yoshimoto (Blueprint for Change)
17. Laura Miller (Lived expert, (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
18. Leona Tupou (Hauʻula Elementary School)
19. Lida (Lived expert, EPIC ʻOhana)
20. Melissa (Domestic Violence Services for Families, Child & Family Service)
21. Mikiala Lidstone (Ulu Aʻe Learning Center)
22. Moana Lane
23. Moanikeʻala Muna (Lived expert, Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform))
24. Mohala De Lima- (Dept. of Education)
25. Noe Realin (Liliʻuokalani Trust)
26. Puna Levenson (Advocate)
27. Raedine Lave (Hale Naʻau Pono)
28. Raquel Toguchi (Child Welfare Services)
29. Tina Shibata (EPIC ʻOhana)
30. Tori Ikeda (Lived expert)
31. Vanessa Corwin (Hawai'i State Coalition Against Domestic Violence)

Support Team:

1. Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC ʻOhana
2. Noreen Kohl, Hawaiʻi Children's Action Network

Meeting Frequency & Format:

Four virtual 1.5 hour meetings (via Zoom)

Kanaka & Po'e Pasifika (Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islanders) —Round 2

Chair: Stacy Ferreira, Office of Hawaiian Affairs

Participants

1. Emma Kurashige (EPIC 'Ohana)
2. Jackie Hong (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
3. Ka'ano'i Walk (Kamehameha Schools)
4. Kailene Nihipali Sanchez (EPIC 'Ohana)
5. Keala Kaopuiki-Santos (Office of Wellness and Resilience)
6. Ke'ōpū Reelitz (Office of Hawaiian Affairs)
7. Kū'ikeokalani Kamakea-'Ōhelo (Office of Hawaiian Affairs)
8. Mai Hall (Hawai'i Children's Action Network)
9. Matapuna Levenson
10. Moana Lane
11. Moanike'ala Muna (Lived expert, Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
12. Nonohe Botelho (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
13. Shana Kukila (Adoptive Mother, Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
14. Sharon Simms (consultant)
15. Venus Rosete-Medeiros (Hale Kipa)

Support Team:

1. Keala Kaopuiki-Santos, Office of Wellness and Resilience
2. Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC 'Ohana

Meetings and Topics:

1. Permitted Interaction Group (PIG) Meeting with Dr. Michael Ligaliga, Assistant Professor and Program Lead of Pacific Island Studies at BYU Hawai'i.
2. PIG Meeting with Johanna Farmer and Nikki Campbell, Executive Director of the National American Indian Court Judges Association (NAICJA).
3. PIG Meeting with HI H.O.P.E.S. (Hawai'i Helping Our People Envision Success) Youth Leadership Board members and Delia Ulima, Statewide Initiative Manager of EPIC 'Ohana.
4. Meeting with PIG members to discuss Recommendations.
5. PIG Meeting with Makalika Naholowa'a, Executive Director; Kirsha Durante, Litigation Director; and Angela Correa-Pei, Lead for Family Legal Services Program of Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation
6. Meeting with PIG members to discuss Recommendations.
7. PIG Meeting with Josie Howard, founder and CEO of We Are Oceania (WAO); and Emma Kurashige, 'Ohana Conference Manager of EPIC 'Ohana.
8. Meeting with PIG members to discuss Final Recommendations.

Keiki & ʻŌpio (Children & Youth) –Round 2

Chair: Melissa Mayo, EPIC ʻOhana

Participants

1. Carla Houser (RYSE Hawaii)
2. Janae Davis
3. Joshua Franklin (Lived expertise with CW system)
4. Judina Haas (Child & Family Service Maui)
5. Kacie Lambert (Lived expertise with CWS System)
6. Kamaile Miyasato (EPIC 'Ohana)
7. Kayla Samson (EPIC 'Ohana)
8. Kelly Sim (Casey Family Programs)
9. Laura Miller (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
10. Lisa Rapozo (Dept. of Human Services)
11. Liz Brown
12. Moanike'ala Muna (Lived expert, Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
13. Sharon Simms (consultant)

Support Team:

1. Dana Matsunami, National Center for Youth Law
2. Keala Kaopuiki-Santos, Office of Wellness and Resilience
3. Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC ʻOhana

Participants in meetings and data collection:

25 current and former foster youth

Meeting Frequency and Format:

- 2 PIG meetings at beginning and end of Round 2 to design listening sessions and discuss findings.
- 3 listening sessions with current and former foster youth held both in person (O'ahu) and on Zoom.

Lawe Hānai (Caregivers) –Round 2

Chair: Paul Tonnessen, Friends of the Children's Justice Center of Maui

Participants

1. Amanda Mundon (EPIC 'Ohana)
2. April Lum (Dept. of Education)
3. Courtney Dumlao (Child & Family Service)
4. Kailene Nihipali Sanchez (EPIC 'Ohana)
5. Keala Kaopuiki-Santos (State of Hawaii)
6. Moanike'ala Muna (Lived expert, Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
7. Nonohe Botelho (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)

Support Team:

1. Dana Matsunami, National Center for Youth Law
2. Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC ʻOhana

Meeting Frequency and Format:

- 2 PIG meetings, group discussion format (interviewees were invited but none joined).

Mākua & ʻOhana (Parents & Family) –Round 2

Chair: Venus Rosete-Medeiros, Hale Kipa

Participants

1. Amanda Mundon (EPIC 'Ohana)
2. Joshua Franklin (Lived expertise with CWS system)
3. Kamaile Miyasato (EPIC 'Ohana)
4. Kayla Samson (EPIC 'Ohana)
5. Kimberly Nabarro (Lived expert, EPIC 'Ohana)
6. Laura Miller (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
7. Liz Brown
8. Marilyn Yamamoto (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
9. Melissa Mayo (EPIC 'Ohana)
10. Moana Lane
11. Moanike'ala Muna (Lived expert, Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
12. Noe Realin (Lili'uokalani Trust)
13. Nonohe Botelho (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)
14. Scott Shimabukuro (Dept. of Health)
15. Shana Kukila (Hawaii Coalition for Child Protective Reform)

Support Team:

1. Dana Matsunami, National Center for Youth Law
2. Keala Kaopuiki-Santos, Office of Wellness and Resilience
3. Lise Vaughan-Sekona, EPIC ʻOhana

Meeting Frequency and Format:

- Seven meetings, 1.5 hrs. each
- Recommendations were compiled through discussion and interviews with individuals representing the following groups:
  - Birth Parents
  - Former Foster Youth
  - Parent Partners
  - Resource Caregivers
  - Kin
  - Family Advocates
  - Domestic Violence Advocates
  - staff from the following organizations:
    - Department of Health
    - Department of Human Services
    - EPIC ʻOhana, Liliʻuokalani Trust
    - Hawaii Coalition Against Domestic Violence

Community Meeting Participation

1. Hāna Community Meeting (by Zoom): 11 working group members, 8 community members, 8 support staff
2. Hilo Community Meeting: 3 working group members, 33 community members, 6 support staff
3. Kailua-Kona Community Meeting: 13 working group members, 16 community members, 3 support staff
4. Kaua'i Community Meeting: 10 working group members, 31 community members, 7 support staff
5. Lāna'i Community Meeting (by Zoom): 9 working group members, 0 community members, 4 support staff
6. Maui Community Meeting: 13 working group members, 21 community members, 7 support staff
7. Moloka'i Community Meeting: 5 working group members, 8 community members, 3 support staff
8. Statewide Community Meeting: 11 working group members, 14 community members, 12 support staff
9. Wāhiawa Community Meeting: 9 working group members, 22 community members, 5 support staff
10. Wai'anae Community Meeting: 11 working group members, 29 community members, 4 support staff
11. Waimānalo Community Meeting: 10 working group members, 41 community members, 7 support staff

D. Recommendations from Community Meetings

The third question we asked in each community listening session was a request for participants to articulate our collective hope for a child welfare system that serves our children and families well. What follows is a summary of what was said. The recommendations are shared in list form here to capture the hundreds of ideas that were presented, using exact wording if suggestions were provided in survey submissions or Permitted Action Group reports. When multiple versions of a suggestion were made, as was the case with many of the items, they were combined into a single item. While this might lose the nuances of some suggestions, it greatly reduced the length of this section while maintaining the core of the suggestions. Appendices H and I include links to Permitted Action Group reports and other source information for those who want to read the full breadth of recommendations collected through the process. Some suggestions are repeated in multiple sections because they relate to different issues. Sometimes there are suggestions that are similar but not exactly the same.

The state, and especially the child welfare and related systems, recognizes and addresses historical trauma and promote cultural practices and strategies for healing

- Return to cultural roots and re-establish Hawaiian cultural systems.
- Recognize and support traditional healers and traditional medicine as a framework for health, wellbeing, and treatment.
- Establish Pu'uhonua (cultural healing spaces) in every moku (district).
- Place foster children with families they can relate to culturally.
- Incorporate more cultural practices and respect for community elders.
- Provide more culturally sensitive programming.
- Implement ʻāina-based learning and Hawaiian values in education.
- Provide ʻāina-based learning opportunities to families and caregivers.
- Increase cultural reconnection and access for foster youth, provide funding for cultural activities, remove barriers to participation.
- Define “cultural activities,” “culturally appropriate,” “culturally sensitive,” “culturally rooted.”
- Seek to better understand the kuleana of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs, the Hawaiian Trusts, and Hawaiian Civic Clubs and increase involvement of these groups in supporting children and families.
- Sustain and expand the work of Nā Kama a Hāloa Network.
- Implement hoʻoponopono practices in the CWS system.
- Institute an Indigenous Cultural Oversight Committee to do in-home family work with clients.
- Formally establish diversion options that uplift culturally grounded, trauma-informed supports for families as a differential response to avoid CWS intervention.
- Explore legislation similar to the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) to recognize the historic use of child welfare system interventions as a way to sever and destroy culture for Native Hawaiians and ensure Native Hawaiian families therefore have access to appropriate and proportionate services.

- Create a culturally based family court system or process for Native Hawaiian families similar to tribal courts.
- Provide funding to support the staff and experts that do this work and for family bonding services and programs that support traditional healing. Grant funding is not sustainable, funding should be via long term contracts. Unrestricted funding is needed to support cultural work.

Systems and individuals within systems become culturally competent

- Mandate comprehensive training on Native Hawaiian history, culture, and perspectives for all system participants.
- Ground CWS practices in Native Hawaiian values.
- Integrate cultural experts and mentors into state agencies.
- Emphasize cultural identification for youth in the intake process and service plans.
- Ensure that assessment tools, evaluation instruments, and treatment modalities are culturally appropriate.
- Legally recognize and legislate hanai and luhi to support family connections.
- Assign country-aligned social workers to match families' culture and social status.
- Address language barriers and create access to in-language programs.

Everyone who works with families provides trauma-informed interactions and care

- Treat parents and children with dignity, honesty, and integrity.
- A trauma-informed and trauma-responsive approach & practice, includes these characteristics: accountability, “voice and choice,” peer supports, and cultural responsiveness. These are necessary components to the transformational change of the child welfare system sought by Mālama ʻOhana Working Group.
- Require training on trauma-informed care for CWS, the judiciary, lawyers, GALs, and all service providers who work with families.
- Create a system that works with families and children and not against them.
- Create a special CWS Domestic Violence unit, similar to the unit created for victims of sexual abuse.
- Have experts in domestic violence in every unit working directly with caseworkers.
- If removal of children is necessary, ensuring that removal is done in a trauma-sensitive, private, thoughtful, and transparent manner (i.e., not in public places or schools). If at all possible, ensure a "warm call," allowing parents and children to communicate immediately after removal.
- Provide interventions, services, and supports to children and youth that help them heal from the traumas they have endured—including supporting siblings in remaining connected and overcoming challenging dynamics related to abuse and removal.
- Protect personal information and respect privacy when working with families and preparing oral and written reports.

Peer support programs are valued and supported and available for everyone involved with the child welfare system

- Value peer support and honor and uplift youth and family voice and choice.
- Engage peer partners as supports and navigators for parents and youth.
- Parent peer support represents a solution to address the issues that arise from mistrust and fear of CWS among families.
- Demonstrate the value of peer support, eliminate barriers to peer support, and develop certification, training, and support to scale this service.
- Expand and provide additional support for peer support programs for parents and youth involved with state agencies and "systems," and explore options for the roles and goals of the peers providing support, including system navigation, advocacy, emotional support, coaching, etc.
- Implement formal peer support within CWS to help youth, birth parents, and resource caregivers navigate the child welfare system and understand the procedures and processes.
- Ensure all youth and parents at risk of or involved with CWS have a peer partner and/or family advocate with lived experience.
- Facilitate youth and parent participation in peer support groups.

Hawai‘i has a culture of mandated supporting

System-Level Change

- Seek commitment from public state leaders (e.g., the Governor, the Legislature, the Executive Branch) and communities to build a system that supports our families so that families thrive and children are safe.
- Create sustainable, long-term funding streams for community-based organizations to implement innovative approaches to address diverse needs of families and children involved with CWS, and those at risk of CWS involvement.
- Change the name of CWS to reflect that the agency values strengthening families.
- Shift away from a punitive or policing approach toward a public health approach; move away from law enforcement mentality to social work mentality.
- Ensure that the CWS approach recognizes that children exist within a family ecosystem and support should be provided for the entire family unit.
- Revise the Hawai'i Child Protective Act Definitions (587A-4) to exclude poverty as a primary basis for neglect and clarify that families who are financially unable to provide for a child should not be referred to CWS if there are no additional reasons to believe that child maltreatment is occurring.
- Provide safe spaces for networking and support for CWS stakeholders.
- Hold regular community events.

Prevention Infrastructure

- Work with state agencies to include primary child abuse and neglect prevention planning and infrastructure work as a standard component of contracts for services related to family strengthening, parenting, primary and secondary child abuse and neglect prevention, and child abuse and neglect intervention.
- Create and publicly fund an independent child abuse prevention entity to coordinate Hawai'i child abuse and neglect prevention activities; collaborate with public and private partners; develop recommendations for statutory, policy, regulation, practice, and training changes as needed; advise the legislature, Governor's office, and state agencies; design and implement a state child abuse and neglect prevention plan; and ensure accountability and transparency regarding child abuse and neglect prevention resources and activities.

Support Services and Resources

- Create Ka Piko. Empower communities to take care of their own families and children. Implement more community-based support systems.
- Create a widely accessible, user-friendly, workable, and well-funded way for people who need supports and services (like food, housing, household supplies, emotional support, SUD treatment, parenting advice, etc.) to get what they need without having to go through CWS.
- Provide safe haven, community-based locations (Pu'uhonua) (Ka Piko) for families to seek help, including legal support, to address safety and poverty-related concerns and prevent child abuse and neglect without fear of immediate CWS involvement. These resource centers will incorporate the Protective Factors in a culturally appropriate manner and offer resource navigation for families.
- Identify and utilize natural supports in the community.
- Leverage a network of churches as spaces for healing.
- Invest in and prioritize community-based services to address conflict and custody disputes before they escalate.
- Expand accessibility and eligibility for DOH CAMHD programs as a strategy to improve access to formal support among families with special needs.
- Create better respite care processes and options.
- Commit resources to overall ohana wellbeing in schools and communities.
- Convert unused lands (e.g., Sea Life Park, Olomana Golf Course) to address community needs.

Parent and Family Support

- Use data and parent and stakeholder input to create a continuum of state-subsidized, effective, high-quality supports for parents of infants that would ensure that all parents would have access to some level of supports and services.
- Explore options for creating a universal, short-term, light-touch support, including home visiting, for all parents after birth.
- Gain a better understanding of the benefits, drawbacks, costs, and utilization of existing parent support resources such as The Parent Line.
- Explore and understand the elements of an effective, well-utilized "warm line" for parents; gain a better understanding of the benefits, drawbacks, costs, and utilization of existing parent support resources such as The Parent Line.

Hawai‘i offers a strong array of accessible services and supports for families

Access and Navigation

- Raise awareness of available resources. Ensure that families have easy access to information and resources they need to raise safe and healthy children. Provide navigation services as needed.
- Explore the possibility of statutorily creating a single statewide resource hub for human services workers and families; gain a better understanding of the benefits and drawbacks to existing services such as AUW211 and Unite Hawai'i.
- More resources and services need to be available to families in areas of high need and low resources such as Moloka’i and Hana.

Basic Needs Support

- Implement high-priority access to treatment beds and housing for CWS-involved families.
- Increase affordable housing options; ease housing restrictions that create barriers; implement programs to prevent homelessness; create emergency family shelters in Kona.
- Address poverty-related issues that can lead to neglect allegations—housing, childcare, healthcare, utilities, public-benefits, food security, and more without increasing risk of CWS involvement. Shift mindsets and policy towards economic justice for families as primary prevention of child maltreatment and reduced involvement with CWS.
- Remove barriers to accessing Medicaid, SNAP, WIC and other family support programs and aim for seamless, continuous enrollment whenever possible.

Mental Health and Crisis Services

- Expand access to and availability of community-based mental health services for both parents and children, including crisis response services.
- Ensure timely access to therapeutic services including whole family therapy and therapy between siblings as desired.
- Ensure rapid access to high-quality crisis services such as supports for victims of DV and sexual assault and supports for houseless families.
- Explore the utilization and effectiveness of mobile crisis response and stabilization services for youth and adults.

Community and Family Support

- Provide more comprehensive parenting supports and services for parents at risk of CWS involvement without increasing the likelihood that they will be referred to CWS.
- Provide state-funded expansion of community resource centers such as Neighborhood Places and Family Resource Centers.
- Create more HeadStart programs.
- Normalize and share foster care responsibilities in communities.
- Provide parenting classes, especially culturally based classes like Kamalama.

Specialized Support Services

- Recognize and support traditional healers and traditional medicine and care as a framework for health, wellbeing and treatment.
- The educational system's supportive programming should include positive relationships, substance abuse prevention, sexual and child abuse awareness, missing children, and trafficking awareness.
- Implement measures to prevent human trafficking.
- Support family connections for incarcerated parents and ensure they have access to services, especially those required by their service plans.

Family separation is rare, and family connections are preserved

Avoid Family Separation

- Removal of children should be a rare last resort when nothing can be done to keep a child safely at home.
- CWS should only be used for the very worst cases. Do not allow CWS to remove kids unless absolutely necessary.
- Transform CWS to focus more on family support than child removal.
- Make stronger efforts to keep family connected and intact—forcing families to separate is counterproductive to helping parents be motivated to get better.

Provide More Support to Minimize Family Separation

- Allocate additional funds to support HRS § 346-65. "Child abuse and neglect discretionary emergency assistance," and explore revising that statute to broaden the situations in which assistance can be provided and to increase the amount that can be provided to a family.
- Provide in-home wrap around services to families identified as at risk of separation.
- Ensure financial struggles don't lead to child removal. Replace and reduce CWS involvement among families where poverty or unmet needs are the sole basis for "neglect." Opportunities include expanding community homeless liaison roles and utilizing Neighborhood Places and Ka Piko.
- Give parents robust support in completing service plans, financial support, and resources.

Placement Decisions and Processes

- Prioritize kinship placement options and keep youth within their familiar communities when possible.
- Conduct more thorough investigations before removing children.
- Remove abusers instead of children in domestic violence situations when possible.
- Allow families more time to choose alternative caregivers for children.
- Allow youth aged 12 and older to participate in placement decisions.
- Do not place keiki with military families that will be relocated out of state/country.

Relative Caregiver Support

- Family Caregiver Requirements—give 6 month provisional license, make resource caregiver classes optional. Cultural considerations will be given to families, and occupant and room capacity will not be a factor for immediate placement and licensing.
- Establish a clear, accessible, and simplified process for siblings who have aged out to become resource caregivers for younger siblings.
- Facilitate relationships/partnerships between foster parents and birth parents.

Maintaining Family Connections

- Focus on the family as a whole—as the environment in which children develop, and focus on the child within and as a part of the family ecosystem. This includes using family-centered case planning and processes, providing supports needed to prevent removal, prioritizing and maintaining sibling connections, prioritizing kinship care (including streamlining process for siblings who age out to become resource caregivers for younger siblings, fully supporting family visitation/'ohana time, and providing services and supports to achieve timely reunification.
- Ensure frequent sibling and family visitation, possibly through mandates. Allow immediate communication upon removal.
- Keep siblings together when they are taken from their homes.
- Increase support for reunification efforts; review and adjust reunification timelines.

Post-TPR Family Connections

- Establish a process for parents to have a second chance to engage in services after termination of parental rights.
- Facilitate opportunities for parents and youth to have a relationship after termination of parental rights.

Youth who age out of care receive appropriate support

- Avoid aging out by focusing on permanency options, especially supporting youth in their homes if that is what they want.
- Improve supports for older youth, including resources, subsidies, training, and services to facilitate a smooth transition to adulthood.
- Address conflicting requirements that create barriers to independence and education for older youth in foster care.

The rights of youth, parents, and family members are promoted and protected

Transparency and Information Access

- Implement a mechanism for the child welfare system to ensure parents are given clear information about their rights, ideally coupled with assistance of parent peer support.
- Create a map or infographic of the CWS process for families and children.
- Make policies and procedures publicly accessible.
- Allow families to document interactions with CWS workers.
- Implement a bill of rights for parents and youth.

Youth Rights and Engagement

- Use youth-friendly language in all interactions.
- When CWS is investigating, require transparency with youth about why and how to seek help in the future if investigation does not proceed.
- Create a clear pathway to emancipation for older teens that preserves their access to benefits.
- Ensure that all placements, including therapeutic placements, abide by the Foster Youth Bill of Rights.
- Expand the pono process.

Court Access and Support

- Create a process to make sure that youth are informed and have transportation and access to court, as well as a process to prepare and debrief with youth.
- CWS/GAL will help youth have a private meeting with judge prior to each hearing, or provide reason why the youth did not meet with judge.
- Provide financial resources for parents to attend court hearings, treatment, therapy, etc.
- Create a specialized "keiki court" for child welfare cases so they are handled separately from all other family court cases.

Legal Representation and Advocacy

- Provide youth with the right to client-directed counsel. Improve training and practice of guardians ad litem.
- Require specialized training and recruitment for parents' court-appointed and private attorneys practicing juvenile dependency law.
- Provide Kanaka and Po'e Pasifika attorney and GAL that represents the child and parents best interest and their native rights, perhaps through Native Hawaiian Legal Corporation.
- Explore the use of IV-E funding to support attorneys and support staff, including peer partners, for parents and children who have Family Court cases and concurrently, explore whether changes are needed to statutes permitting or requiring legal representation in Family Court cases.
- When desired, ensure that a domestic violence advocate is provided for parents.
- Ensure that children have access to legal counsel to protect their civil legal rights, including the right to receive social security or other benefits to which they are entitled, to pursue civil legal claims such as for a personal injury, and the right to receive benefits from their Hawaiian ancestry by, for example, registering with the Kamehameha Schools Ho'oulu Verification Services and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs and the Hawaiian Registry Program.

Legal System Improvements

- Prohibit crossover between parents' attorneys and GALs (and children's counsel, when relevant).
- Develop an ethics statement clarifying relationships between the roles of GALs, parents' attorneys, and judges, as well as transparent protocol around conflicts of interest.
- Recognize power of attorney documents across all agencies.
- Address the potential for retaliation and abusive litigation that can occur with the Temporary Restraining Order process.

The child welfare system is transparent, accountable, and has external oversight

Overarching Recommendations

- Provide continued funding for Malama 'Ohana Working Group to provide oversight for the reforms enacted for the next 3 to 5 years
- Increase resources and investments in children, families, and systems.
- Increase incentives for social workers and teachers in high-need areas.
- Increase funding for CWS and foster parents.
- Update the technologies used by DHS and CWS.
- Address administrative processes taking up too much of CWS workers' time.
- Create a multi-disciplinary legislative study committee to explore the processes by which the state secures the private provision of services to support children and families with the goals of: improving services provided, improving transparency, modernizing the procurement and contracting process, paying contractors for the full costs of services provided, increasing the input from consumers (mostly families and children) and providers in identifying needed services and in designing the RFP process, maximizing collaboration among system partners, minimizing costs, maximizing benefits for families and children, improving outcomes for children and families, increasing the ability of the state and providers to nimbly respond to changing needs and changes in the sector, improving accountability.
- Hold workers accountable for perjury and crimes.
- Conduct a full audit of CWS at the state and county levels.
- Require psychological assessments and drug testing for CWS workers.
- Strictly enforce rules and policies around conflicts of interest and strengthen those rules if needed.
- Create formal administrative review process to determine whether a worker can be a resource caregiver to ensure no conflict of interest.
- Ensure consistency in implementing policies—policies and procedures might be good, but practice standards are not.
- Address low morale and lack of passion among some workers.
- Resolve the issue of overworked law enforcement.
- Require additional, specialized judicial training.
- Ensure systems are responsive to the specific needs of different islands and areas around the state.
- Address exigent circumstances for removal and how imminent harm affects how families are involved with CWS, or children are placed in foster care.
- Utilize the Care Portal tech platform for child welfare services.
- Create dual degree programs in education and social work.

- Provide guidance to legislators from people with lived experience.
- Make Family First Hawai'i more specific and actionable.
- Implement policy and procedural changes across the court system and CWS to address the unique needs of parents experiencing domestic violence.
- Legislate funding for highly qualified domestic violence experts; staff each CWS section with at least one expert.
- Pursue reconciliation at the systems level and create a trauma-responsive space for healing across both system employees and communities.
- Explore how to maximize the benefits of and community representation on advisory groups such as the Children's Justice Act Task Force, CAPTA Citizen Panel Review, Child Welfare Services Branch Advisory Committee, Child Welfare Services Branch Continuous Quality Improvement Council, Court Improvement Project Advisory Committee, Hawai'i Early Learning Board, Hawai'i Early Childhood Advocacy Alliance, Juvenile Justice State Advisory Council, state and county youth commissions, county early childhood coordinators, and other similar bodies, and develop a concrete plan to increase the transparency, effectiveness, and impact of these groups over the next five years.

Improve the safety and well-being of children

- Collaborative partnerships and greater flexibility for community based agencies receiving purchase of service contracts to implement innovative approaches to address the needs of families and children.
- A CWS employee recommended "bring back the permanency unit" to improve "oversight on adoption and legal guardianship cases to ensure that our children continue to be safe and cared for even after the case is closed."
- Require the state to provide an unbiased, holistic, culturally appropriate, and independent psychologist with specialized training in childhood trauma and healing best practices to determine best placement for the child(ren).
- CWS to do welfare checks on families after permanency where they speak to the kids and do more to support families after reunification.
- Service providers indicated that needed changes include "more regulations for safety of children in the foster care system."
- Improve oversight of homeschooled children.
- Children in the foster care system be automatically eligible for services from DOH and DOE as needed, improved access to individualized service plans, and automatic follow through for system involved children (i.e. when involved with two or more state systems).
- Allow youth in foster care to be automatically eligible for SNAP benefits and make the provision of WIC benefits for young children in foster care automatic.
- Allow flexibility in responses to unique family situations because one size does not fit all in the agency's approach to timing, reunification, and prevention.
- Legislate that child welfare services focus on both protection and prevention.
- Provide access to therapeutic and counseling supports for children and youth.

- Do more to place siblings together or provide significantly greater opportunities for connection and sharing physical space and time together, without placing additional burdens on resource caregivers.
- CWS should provide frequent, transparent, age-appropriate updates to young people about the case direction, so they are aware well in advance of any changes and able to voice their position.
- Ensure that as long as CWS is involved with a family, CWS workers regularly talk to the children and youth outside of the presence of parents and resource caregivers.
- Students with IEP or 504 should remain within their original home school district.
- Require transition plans for whenever a child transitions from one program to another or moves placements.

Provide more support for and oversight of resource caregivers

- Better support resource caregivers through more training on trauma and more information about and services for children and youth in their care.
- Require specialized training and support for resource caregivers of children with disabilities.
- Help foster parents build bigger houses to support more children.
- Develop an app for resource caregivers to help with respite care.
- Create opportunity for resource caregivers to have legal representation.
- Provide more support to resource caregivers.
- Provide more support to relative caregivers and make it easier for family members to become resource caregivers.
- Foster relationships between resource caregivers and birth parents even if they are family.
- Provide more monitoring of the children. Implement unannounced visits to foster homes.
- Have better screening of foster parents. Have more consistent monitoring and support of foster parents.
- Implement stronger processes to ensure that resource caregivers are upholding the youth's rights, that they report when youth run away or leave the resource caregiver's home without permission, and that they do not retaliate against youth for any reason.

Improve Communications, Transparency, and Collaboration

- CWS, the Judiciary, and other agencies must improve their transparency and communication with families and community, as well as implement more creative approaches for the child welfare system to build trust with families.
- Improve coordination across state agencies including DHS, DOH, DOE, and the Judiciary to address the unmet need for supports and services among CWS-involved families or as prevention for those at risk of CWS involvement, including services needed for mental health concerns, domestic violence, substance use disorder, housing insecurity, amongst other issues intersection child abuse and neglect.
- Increase the participation of the medical community in developing and implementing CAN prevention strategies, policies, and activities.
- Convene a multi-disciplinary working group or a legislative study committee to fully understand the gaps in Hawai'i regarding SUD treatment services for pregnant and parenting women, especially women who are survivors of DV or are involved with CWS.
- Create a legislative study committee to understand the effectiveness of Family Court Drug Court (FCDC), the need for it, whether to expand it to other islands, and how to improve the program and/or better align it with the evidence-based model of FCDC.
- Create a legislative study committee to understand the state's obligations and response regarding infants with prenatal substance exposure and their families.
- Explore and utilize emergency room ICD (International Classification of Diseases) codes and other information to better understand the extent of child maltreatment and domestic violence requiring medical care.
- Improve coordination to address barriers to supports and services, including insurance or other prerequisites for mental healthcare.
- Ensure that Hawai'i is maximizing its use of Medicaid dollars to support families and children by having established processes to bill for things like peer supports, navigation services, and other similar benefits.
- Study and understand the decrease in the number of families accessing home visiting services in Hawai'i over the last 10 years, and the feasibility of expanding access to evidence-based services that offer home visiting including Early Head Start, DOH MIECHV programs, CWS Home Visiting programs.
- Collect and analyze information about services for parents of infants to understand what's available to whom, what's utilized and by whom, what's publicly funded and privately funded, what people are getting for their money, and what gaps exist.
- Improve judges' understanding of what CWS employees do.
- In some places across the state, address animosity between advocates for victims of domestic violence and CWS.
- Require a clear process for how CWS handles hotline reports and anonymous reports.
- Require public education around the actual legal requirements of mandatory reporting, how child abuse and neglect are defined, and what constitutes abuse.
- Provide clear financial transparency for state CWS budgets.
- Implement a process to examine and learn from mistakes and make amends and changes rather than covering things up.
- Open up the courts.
- Make records of child deaths public.

Improve Data Collection, Analysis, and Use

- Use data to understand why families are referred to or involved with CWS, what prevention and intervention responses are likely to be helpful, and how resources are and can be used for prevention and intervention.
- Disaggregate CWS data at county level.
- Develop a transparent, collaborative, effective quality improvement process; collect and use timely, accurate data to best serve families and report regularly on system operations and performance.
- Report on the Status of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Keiki in Care. Annual Report/Audit with recommendations on the status of Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander keiki in CWS with qualitative data.
- Legislatively require DOH and DHS to provide current, disaggregated county and state-level data related to child abuse and neglect, maternal and child fatalities, PRAMS, and serious child injuries.
- Fund revenue maximization, IT, data scientist and epidemiology positions in DHS and DOH and if people cannot be hired in Hawai'i, provide exceptions for remote contracts or employment to fill those positions.
- For all documents that DOH, DHS, and DOE are required to submit to the state or federal government, require DOH, DHS, and DOE to publicly post those documents within 30 days of submission or approval by the required state or federal agency, including funding requests and reports for all areas under Title IV and Title V, including CAPTA and CJA.
- Require and fund data-sharing among all state agencies providing government-funded services to support children or parents and enact the statutory framework and budget to facilitate data-sharing.
- Provide the funding and staffing to ensure that DHS data collection and reporting complies with the AFCARS (Adoption and Foster Care Analysis) 2020 Final Rule and all other federal rules and regulations regarding data.
- Require CWS and DOH Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division to work together to collect specified de-identified information about parents with substance use disorders, access to services, and treatment outcomes and to share it with system partners (or make it publicly available) for making decisions about system design, service implementation, and funding allocations related to parents with substance use disorders whose children are reported to CWS.

Implement an independent grievance process or ombudsperson function

- Develop an effective, transparent process for reporting harm caused by CWS and ensuring it does not go unaddressed; no retaliation for reporting. This process must be accessible both for parents and for youth to report concerns without fear of retaliation (this is particularly essential for youth who experience abuse while in care). For example, create an independent oversight body—the Office of Procedural Excellence and Navigation (OPEN).

- Provide transparency in government operations by publicly reporting on metrics related to system performance, including funding sources and expenditures and family and child outcomes
- Conduct a look-back style analysis of families where removal was deemed unnecessary and identify policy changes that can help prevent unnecessary involvement with CWS.
- Create an institutional space, internal to DHS, for families to officially report grievances and complaints that also ensures accountability. Suggestions included an ethics commission, a process modeled off the pono process designed to uphold rights of foster youth that includes education about one's rights and collaborative process to address concerns, designated human resources to address issues internal to CWS.
- Create an ʻOhana Welfare Commission, an ongoing, independent commission that is similar to the police commission to oversee CWS, hear grievances that have not been addressed by the Department, and investigate concerns to create another layer of accountability.

The CWS workforce is highly qualified, expertly trained, and well-compensated

Training and Professional Development

- Provide consistent, high quality training for CWS workers, including online or virtual training opportunities made accessible during normal working hours.
- Ensure that training addresses explicit and implicit bias and cultural competency.
- Provide training on trauma-informed care and provide coaching to support this.
- For all employees, require multi-cultural competency, an entrance exam, enhanced hiring and training requirements, regular refresher training with exams, coaching, continuous professional development, regular evaluation and reflective supervision, better oversight, manageable caseloads, support for vicarious, secondary and primary trauma, specialized supports to "heal the healers," and collaborate with employees to develop and implement additional workforce retention strategies.

Expertise and Credentialing

- Implement a credentialing process to document and reward worker expertise. This can include subject matter examinations, case portfolios, coaching, continuing education and evaluation requirements, and 360 evaluation.
- Provide rewards for obtaining and maintaining expertise such as scholarships and credentialing for social workers, in partnership and collaboration with unions as appropriate to elevate the CWS workers competence, compensation, and retention.

Workforce Support and Retention

- Improve compensation and reduce caseloads.
- Implement non-punitive approaches to systems change, including but not limited to mental health support, fair compensation, trauma-informed onboarding and professional support, and access to professional development to address systemic issues, including CWS vacancies and turnover, burnout among CWS staff, and chronic trauma experienced among individuals employed by the child welfare system.

Recruitment and Hiring

- Improve the recruitment and onboarding processes and procedures.
- Create pathways for people with lived experience to work for CWS and other system-related agencies.
- Include adults and youth with lived experience in the hiring and training of CWS workers.

Additional stakeholder recommendations

- A young person who had been in foster care offered these recommendations for systemic change:

"A lot of training on understanding the governing policies, following those policies, collaborations with service providers, working on retention of workers, education and strict enforcement for foster parents and service providers. I would also consider reducing the geographical elements that each worker is required to cover - break it down into smaller segments. Reduce caseloads if possible."

- CWS employees shared the need for "more supports." One service provider suggested educational and training approaches for the child welfare system including,

"To improve competency of social workers and case managers, the educational institutions and educators of these training program need to re-evaluate their curriculum to ensure focus is more on practical skills. Create practicing sites that give real life experience and can provide quality mentorship that is not hindered by Practicum instructor's time or workload constraints. Practicum instructors should be vetted for competency and compensated for their time mentoring."

E. Implementing the Vision

Appendix E provides additional information about two key aspects of the vision for a reimagined Family Support System:

- Prioritize mandated supporting, which emphasizes preventive support over intervention.
- Embed accountability mechanisms into the system design.

The sections that follow highlight possible strategies for implementing suggestions gathered through the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group process and identify specific areas for further research. This Appendix focuses on the two needs that came up most often in community meetings and through the Permitted Interaction Groups—the need for more preventive services and supports for families before they reach a crisis point and the need for accountability and transparency throughout the child welfare system.

Do More to Support Families and Keep Children Safely at Home

Develop Hawai'i HEARS: A New Bridge for Community Connections and Family Support

Hawai'i needs a new way to support families and this vision presents a bold, expansive way to do that. We repeatedly heard that many families simply need assistance but either don't know where to find it or fear asking for help. Our current system defaults to CWS intervention when families struggle—an inefficient and unnecessarily intrusive pathway for connecting families with resources. Recent data highlights this inefficiency: ***of all child abuse and neglect hotline reports received, 70-75% are screened out, 13% receive a differential response, and 16% receive a full CWS response, with only 4% resulting in a confirmed victim.***

This distribution of responses raises critical questions about resource allocation and system efficiency.[14]

[14] Hawai'i Data Booklet APSR FFY 2024, Figures 1 and 2.

Furthermore, service delivery remains inadequate even for families within the system. According to Child Maltreatment 2022, only about 60% of confirmed victims and 13% of non-victims received services within 90 days after a maltreatment determination.[15] These statistics clearly demonstrate why a more appropriate and efficient pathway is needed for families needing support and resources.

As the Hawai'i HEARS[16] concept is further developed, several key considerations will need to be addressed. Success requires careful attention to structural and operational details. While the complete design of HEARS requires further development, our community conversations have generated promising ideas for its implementation and the community should continue to help design this new approach.

Build Community Pathways

A true transformation of our current child welfare system requires both internal changes to what is now CWS and the development of robust external structures that support families before children become unsafe. These external structures, including Hawai'i HEARS and Ka Piko, will create a continuum of care and support for families that includes the reimagined Family Support and Child Protection Branch.

Supporting families through a continuum of care requires detailed coordination and involves many complex steps including:

- Developing intake and referral pathways.
- Clarifying roles and responsibilities.
- Coordinating to maximize funding.
- Building a robust array of services from universal prevention to urgent crisis response.

When we successfully implement the vision, Hawai'i will have strong community services designed to mitigate family risks, allowing children to safely remain at home while families receive support with minimal or no intervention by the Family Support and Child Protection Branch.

[15] Child Maltreatment 2022, Table 6-2.

[16] While we use Hawai'i HEARS (Help, Empower, Advocate, Reassure and Support) as the working name for this transformed agency, our community conversations yielded various suggestions, and the final name remains open for discussion. What matters more than the name is the essential reimagining of the work.

Develop Clear Pathways and Clarify Roles

Hawai'i HEARS will develop comprehensive, user-friendly intake and referral processes designed to connect families with appropriate services quickly and effectively. While Hawai'i HEARS provides some time-limited direct services, its primary role involves facilitating warm hand-offs to organizations offering more extensive navigation assistance and direct services.

These pathways must ensure:

- Direct routes to needed services.
- Warm hand-offs with follow-up mechanisms.
- Clear connections to Ka Piko network.
- Seamless access to crisis response and treatment services.
- Effective coordination with the Family Support and Child Protection Branch.

Hawai'i HEARS must work closely with the Family Support and Child Protection Branch, Ka Piko, and other community partners to collectively develop intake processes and referral pathways. Clear explanations and expectations of each entity's responsibilities and how all the entities seamlessly coordinate will be embedded in mindsets, commitment, values, policy, training, practice, and public education.

As coordination protocols are developed, some of the many considerations will include:

- Clarifying the best ways to meet families' needs, regardless of how they enter the system.
- Determining a family's eligibility for services.
- Maintaining confidentiality while also collecting required data and sharing information across agencies.
- Defining pathways as concurrent or alternative.
- Implementing protections to ensure children's safety.
- Notifying parents and children of their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities.
- Identifying opportunities and boundaries for proactive outreach to families identified through various channels.
- Developing the roles of peer support specialists.[17]
- Ensuring a seamless transfer of calls between Hawai'i HEARS and the Family Support and Child Protection Branch and vice versa when that is needed.

[17] The 2024 legislature established a working group to examine both the potential and limitations of peer support, and that working group will be an essential resource for developing both HEARS and Ka Piko.

Maximize Federal Funding

To pay for a comprehensive array of support services, Hawai'i will need to maximize the amount of federal funds it can access, including Title IV-E. A critical early step in planning for federal funding is to understand the realistic maximum amount of funding Hawai'i could receive under each revenue stream. Next, we will need to understand how to maximize that funding and begin making necessary changes. If Hawai'i pursues IV-E maximization, specialized staff positions must be created and funded, supported by necessary data systems.

Title IV-E funds can pay for services to prevent the need for foster care. Some states use these funds expansively, in part by developing a "Community Pathway" for services outside the state child welfare agency. Family First Hawai'i is the current pathway for CWS to spend Title IV-E funds on services to prevent family separation.

In the envisioned future state, the Family Support and Child Protection Branch will continue to administer Family First Hawai'i, with supportive services expanded to many more families by:

- Developing a Community Pathway.
- Broadening the current definition of "candidate for foster care" in the state Title IV-E Prevention Plan.
- Having a clear process for determining eligibility for Title IV-E Prevention Services (Family First Hawai'i) provided through the Community Pathway.
- Expanding the number and type of services in the state's Title IV-E Prevention Plan.
- Exploring flexibility for including Native Hawaiian cultural practices and adaptations of evidence-based services in the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse, similar to existing flexibility granted for tribal practices and adaptations.[18]
- Partnering with community agencies to deliver economic and concrete supports.

Successfully maximizing federal funding will require developing robust data and technology capabilities, along with appropriate policies, training, and practice guidelines.

One immediate change that would increase the likelihood of maximizing IV-E prevention funds is for staff associated with Hawai'i HEARS, Ka Piko, and service providers to use Motivational Interviewing (MI) when working with families. MI is a well-supported evidence-based approach recognized by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse and is an approved service in the Hawai'i Title IV-E Prevention Plan.[19] System-wide implementation of MI paves the way for Title IV-E funding to support prevention services utilizing this approach.

[18] Child Welfare Practice Manual 8.6 Questions # 1 and #1 (https://acf.hhs.gov/cwpm/public_html/programs/cb/laws_policies/laws/cwpm/policy_dsp.jsp?citID=630).

[19] See Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse, https://preventionservices.acf.hhs.gov/programs/670/show.

Create a network of Ka Piko or Family Resource Centers: Community Havens for Family Support

While Hawai'i HEARS will serve as the bridge to community resources, Ka Piko, or Family Resource Centers, will be the primary community-based pathway for families to access peer support, system navigation help, and economic and concrete supports. These will be community havens, staffed by highly trained and well-compensated professionals, where families can get what they need to thrive.

Although Hawai'i has existing community havens, including the Family Resource Centers supported by the Hawai'i 'Ohana Support Network and the Neighborhood Places established through the Blueprint for Reform in Child Protective Services, community feedback consistently indicates the need for expansion. Current havens operate in various communities—such as Kalihi, Kapa'a, Kona, Puna, Wai'anae, Wailuku, and Waimea—and several nonprofit organizations offer similar support services. Building upon these foundations requires careful assessment of what works and identification of unmet community needs. An infusion of resources will also be needed, which can include flexible and creative use of federal funding such as Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF), Medicaid, Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, and Title IV-B and IV-E.

To ensure equitable access across Hawai'i, some level of coordination and quality control will be developed for this network of Ka Piko. This is needed to ensure that families receive consistent, high-quality support regardless of their geographic location. One idea is that only trained, "certified" members of the network will receive referrals through Hawai'i HEARS, maintaining service standards while honoring the unique cultural strengths of each community.

Through the network of Ka Piko, families will have access to comprehensive support services before challenges escalate to crises. These services, outlined below, will be high-quality, provided at no cost or on a sliding scale, geographically accessible throughout Hawai'i, and culturally responsive to our diverse communities. Services will be available through multiple pathways—Ka Piko, Hawai'i HEARS, and others to be developed—ensuring families can access support through whatever door feels most comfortable and appropriate. The focus remains on early support and prevention, helping families build strong foundations before challenges become overwhelming.

Family Strengthening and Skills Development

Every family deserves access to knowledge and skills that enhance their parenting journey. Ka Piko will offer a range of evidence-based and culturally grounded educational opportunities, including:

- Traditional Native Hawaiian parenting wisdom through programs like Kamalama Parenting
- Cultural connection through programs such as Fatherhood is Sacred/Motherhood is Sacred
- Evidence-based parenting education adapted to meet diverse cultural needs
- Concrete parenting skills for different developmental stages
- Support for families facing specific challenges (behavioral issues, special needs, adolescent concerns).

Communication and Conflict Resolution

Healthy family relationships require effective communication tools. Accessible services will be available to help families build these essential skills:

- Non-violent communication training
- Conflict resolution techniques
- Stress management and emotional regulation skills
- Family mediation services
- Traditional conflict resolution practices like ho'oponopono
- 'Ohana conferences for extended family decision-making
- Peer support groups for parents and caregivers.

Services will be offered in various formats (individual, group, virtual) and at flexible times to accommodate working families. Language access services and cultural translation will ensure all families can meaningfully engage with these resources. Most importantly, these services will be provided in an environment that honors family dignity, celebrates cultural strengths, and recognizes parents as the experts in their children's lives.

Through this comprehensive approach to family support, we create opportunities for all families to access the tools, knowledge, and support they need to provide safe, nurturing environments for their children.

Housing Security

Housing instability should not cause families to be reported to *Child Protective Services*[20] and should never be the sole reason for family separation. Currently, lack of adequate housing remains one of the primary causes of instability in families. It is also a barrier to both family preservation and reunification, particularly for parents of infants and those struggling with substance use disorders. Our system must prioritize housing solutions that keep families together. For example, parents who are involved with the child welfare system should have priority access to housing. Barriers to eligibility, such as having children in foster care rather than with the parents, should be resolved. Children should not be removed from their parents because of problems stemming from houselessness.

[20] In this Appendix, Child Protective Services refers to the program of the reimagined Family Support and Child Protection Branch that will address child safety and permanency.

Kinship Caregiver Support

Recognizing that relatives care for thousands of children in Hawai'i,[21] the state must provide strong support systems for kinship care arrangements. Some relatives care for children through arrangements with CWS and many provide care through other arrangements, both formal and informal. Additional support might include ensuring access to peer support, navigation services, and resource information. While existing programs provide valuable services, including warmlines, training, and support groups, more information should be gathered from those using the services to assess the level of support provided and identify any additional needs of relative caregivers. Additionally, Hawai'i would benefit from further exploration of a Kinship Navigator Program using evidence-based models that qualify for Title IV-E funding.

Treatment and Crisis Services

Essential services must be readily accessible without requiring *Child Protective Service*s involvement. These include:

- Mobile crisis response services
- Mental and physical health care
- Substance use disorder treatment
- Intimate partner violence support services.

When parents engage with these services in good faith, providers will work collaboratively with families and the Family Support and Child Protection Branch to prevent separation unless children face immediate harm with no other options for keeping children safe at home. Parents involved with or at risk of *Child Protective Services* involvement will receive priority access to services, with interim supports provided during any waiting periods. Importantly, temporary stabilization while awaiting services will not diminish service eligibility or perceived need.

To support this comprehensive service array, Hawai'i will expand Medicaid-eligible services to include peer support, case management, and other services addressing social determinants of health. All services will incorporate peer support and concrete assistance based on family needs and preferences.

[21] Hawai'i State Fact Sheet for Grandfamilies, updated Feb 2021, "GrandFacts State Fact Sheets at www.grandfactsheets.org."

Many of the items to be considered when developing Hawai'i HEARS and Ka Piko also apply to expanding and strengthening treatment and crisis services, including:

- Clarifying the best ways to meet families' needs, regardless of how they enter the system.
- Determining a family's eligibility for services.
- Maintaining confidentiality while also collecting required data and sharing information across agencies.
- Developing intake and referral pathways.
- Implementing protections to ensure children's safety.
- Notifying parents and children of their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities.
- Identifying opportunities and boundaries for proactive outreach to families identified through various channels.
- Developing the roles of peer support specialists.[22]
- Ensuring a seamless transfer of calls and information among Hawai'i HEARS, Ka Piko, Crisis Response Services, and the Family Support and Child Protection Branch.

Establish a robust statewide family strengthening and child abuse and neglect prevention organization

Hawai'i must have a statewide organization dedicated solely to strengthening families and preventing child abuse and neglect, supported by stable, long-term funding. This organization will design, coordinate, and facilitate implementation of comprehensive plans to create and maintain an environment where families receive the support they need to thrive. This entity can use the Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Framework as a blueprint and will build upon the existing prevention work of the Hawai'i Children's Trust Fund Coalition, our state's Prevent Child Abuse America chapter, and strong local coalitions like Ho'oikaika Partnership.

Hawai'i does not currently have an organization responsible for planning and implementing a statewide infrastructure for supporting and strengthening families and thereby preventing child abuse and neglect. We cannot transform our child welfare system without also transforming how we support families to prevent the need for child welfare system involvement. We need a statewide organization to lead these transformations.

Explore the role of mandated reporting and whether changes are needed

Many community members said that a fear of being reported to CWS and having children taken away keeps parents from seeking help, including obtaining physical and mental health care. While the requirement of mandated reporting was originally meant to protect children, many child abuse prevention experts now question the extent to which it achieves that goal. Mandated reporting requirements have led to the over-surveillance of Native Hawaiian families and families experiencing poverty, and to distrust of the child welfare system.

22 The 2024 legislature established a working group to examine both the potential and limitations of peer support, and that working group will be an essential resource for developing both HEARS and Ka Piko.

Hawai'i needs to examine the role of mandated reporting requirements and determine what changes are likely to improve the well-being of children. About 30% of reports from mandated reporters result in confirmations of child maltreatment.[23] Understanding the situations behind the other 70% might help Hawai'i design a more tailored response to families whose children appear to be victims of abuse or neglect.

Published research and the experiences of other states present several options for exploring the role of mandated reporting in child well-being, including possible changes to the mandated reporter statutes in HRS Chapter 350. Research supports a shift in mandated reporting requirements so that mandated reporters have the option to connect families with services when that is the most appropriate response to a concern. Once the Hawai'i HEARS warmline is established, all mandated reporters will be required to participate in annual training that teaches when and why to call the Hawai'i HEARS warmline, when to connect families with Ka Piko, when and why to call the child abuse and neglect hotline, implicit bias, how poverty is related to neglect, and what is not appropriate to report. As the training is being designed, Hawai'i would benefit from a study to understand the rates of reports that are screened in and confirmed by type of reporters and to learn about the situations reported by mandated reporters that are either screened out or not confirmed.

Because mandated reporting is a barrier to parents seeking help, Hawai'i should explore whether and how to create exceptions to mandated reporting so that parents can get help without fear of being reported to the child abuse and neglect hotline. For example, an exception could apply when a person or agency provides supports and services they reasonably believe will prevent future abuse or neglect, except when past or future abuse includes evidence of injury as defined in 350-1(A), the child has been the victim of sexual contact or conduct, the child has been the victim of labor trafficking, or imminent harm as defined in 587A-4 exists. This would be consistent with a shift toward providing mandated reporters with an option to connect families with services instead of reporting them to CWS. Yet another proposal to consider is the creation of traditional Pu'uhonua spaces where parents could get support, information, and guidance and mandated reporting would not apply.

Clarify the legal definitions and practical understanding of child maltreatment

Hawai'i statutes, policies, and procedures will be narrowly tailored so that only children who are being harmed or are at risk of imminent harm will be involved with Family Support and Child Protection Branch Child Protective Services. This allows caseworkers to intensely and expertly serve the small number of families in which children are unsafe and being harmed.

[23] A Statistical Report on Child Abuse and Neglect in Hawai'i 2021, "Source of Report for Children Reported, 2017-2021."

Exclude poverty from the statutory definition of child abuse or neglect

Hawai'i's statutes, policies, procedures, and training should all reflect an understanding of how the U.S. child welfare system was designed to conflate poverty and neglect, including:

- How, when, and why poverty is mistaken for neglect.
- How material hardship causes parental stress and can diminish parents' capacity to meet children's needs.
- How biases and oversurveillance of families, especially low-income families, lead to unnecessary child welfare involvement.

Two immediate actions that Hawai'i can take to distinguish poverty from neglect are to exclude financial inability from (1) the statutory definition of neglect, and (2) the administrative rules definition of negligent treatment. These changes would bring Hawai'i in compliance with July 2024 guidance from the federal Children's Bureau which encourages states to consider exempting "specific circumstances or conditions, including poverty and income-related factors, from the definitions of child abuse and neglect." [24]

Excluding poverty from the Hawai'i statutory definition of child abuse or neglect in HRS § 350-1 would allow the child abuse and neglect hotline to screen out reports that stem primarily from poverty such as malnourishment due to a lack of food or inadequate supervision due to a lack of childcare.

Under the reimagined Family Support System continuum of care and support, children whose health and well-being are threatened because of the impacts of poverty would be supported within their families rather than separated. Their families would be referred to Hawai'i HEARS to address the root condition of poverty. These situations would not trigger a *Child Protective Services* investigation if either: (1) the poverty has not led to actual harm or immediate safety concerns, or (2) if economic or concrete supports would resolve the underlying circumstances that led to the child abuse or neglect report.

Create a shared understanding of imminent harm and threatened harm

The definitions and interpretations of both "imminent harm" and "threatened harm," as defined in HRS § 350-1, must be clarified in agency and court policies, procedures, and practice. The Family Support and Child Protection Branch must issue clear guidance about which situations constitute these forms of harm and what the appropriate system response should be when they are present. The statutory definition of "threatened harm" in HRS § 350-1 should be revised and narrowed so that it can easily be objectively applied in practice. 70% of confirmed maltreatment reports are for children who are victims of "threatened harm." [25]

[24] Federal Child Welfare Policy manual 2.3 CAPTA, Question #5 (July 31, 2024).

[25] Hawai'i Data Booklet APSR FFY 2024, Figure 15.

Implement new strategies to keep children safe at home

In the reimagined Family Support System, family separation will be considered only after all less restrictive options have been exhausted. Extensive research exists on this topic and pilot programs are being implemented across the country. Hawai'i, which so strongly values 'ohana, can use that information and collaboratively develop strategies to keep children with their families. A few possible strategies are included below.

Establish Preventive Legal Services

Preventive legal advocacy represents a crucial strategy for promoting child well-being and preventing unnecessary family separation. Through early legal intervention, families can address civil legal issues before they escalate to child welfare involvement. This holistic, interdisciplinary approach typically involves a team including an attorney, peer support specialist, and social worker.

Preventive legal representation is also helpful after a report is made to CWS but before a court petition is filed. For example, in poverty-related neglect cases, which might involve concerns about housing or substance use, meaningful representation and support can often resolve safety concerns and prevent family separation.

Research shows that preventive legal services effectively reduce family trauma, improve stability and safety, decrease CWS referrals and confirmed abuse cases, and address systemic disproportionality.

To provide this service in Hawai'i, a dedicated office or a network of attorneys providing preventive legal services will need to be established. These services would integrate seamlessly with Hawai'i HEARS, Ka Piko, Crisis Response Services, and other community-based supports, offering consultation and representation on issues ranging from housing and public benefits to guardianships and protective orders.

A related service, which could be provided through a preventive legal services office or a Child Advocate office, is providing public information to educate the public about topics related to CWS involvement; the rights of parents, youth, and relatives; accessing legal counsel; mandated reporter laws; and available family support services, including cultural and peer supports.

Build flexibility into Child Protective Services Responses

Every family and every individual has unique strengths and needs, requiring a child welfare system that can adapt to individual circumstances rather than forcing families into predetermined service pathways. A redesigned Family Support and Child Protection Branch will encourage individualized responses that bridge the common disconnect between available services and family needs.

To achieve this flexibility, many creative strategies will need to be designed. One proposed concept is to create "barrier buster" positions within the Family Support and Child Protection Branch, Hawai'i HEARS, or another appropriate entity. These professionals will support navigators and caseworkers in preventing foster care placement and expediting family reunification by having authority to make key decisions—accessing emergency funds, waiving requirements, adjusting criteria, elevating issues to department heads or the Governor's office, and prioritizing families on waiting lists.

Another step is for the legislature to allocate increased flexible funding to Hawai'i HEARS, Ka Piko, Crisis Response Services, Family Visitation Programs, the Family Support and Child Protection Branch, and other entities. These funds, with input from parents and youth about their use, will support keeping children safely out of foster care and facilitating rapid reunification. Additionally, existing Wraparound and IHBS HomeBuilders services should be evaluated for potential expansion to serve all families needing such support.

When a child is at risk of harm, *Child Protective Services* and community partners can implement strategies to avoid family separation, including the following:

- Wraparound, IHBS Homebuilders, and other services can be provided in the home to mitigate risks.
- If one protective parent or adult relative is available, that adult (or those adults) should receive support to allow the child to safely remain in her home, and persons who pose safety risks should be removed from the home.
- If a trusted relative or friend could temporarily move into the home, thereby bringing stability and support to the family, resources should be allocated for that instead of removing children for less than 90 days.

Over time, these changes will address several problems that communities identified. First, they will renew trust that systems exist to help families, not to take children. Next, they will reduce the number of children in out-of-home placements and allow the shifting of funds from out-of-home placement to in-home supports. Importantly, these changes will right-size the physical and emotional workload of *Child Protective Services* workers because they will have adequate time to work with the families on their caseloads, allowing them to provide excellent services, move cases quickly to permanency, and improve the well-being of children.

Create a higher statutory standard for removals

To better protect family unity while ensuring child safety, Hawai'i must establish more rigorous legal standards for separating families. The Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act offers an instructive model, particularly in its requirement for documented, culturally informed "active efforts" to prevent removal.[26] Under this approach, out-of-home placement would be prohibited unless clear and convincing evidence shows a child would face serious emotional or physical damage by remaining at home, even after implementation of a safety plan.

Several specific statutory changes warrant consideration. First, removal for Threatened Harm could be statutorily prohibited through an amendment to the definition in 587A-4. Additionally, courts should be required to consider the availability of licensed foster homes when granting custody orders. In cases where appropriate foster placement isn't available, resources should instead be directed toward maintaining child safety within the home, potentially including the removal of adults rather than children.

The law should also address provisional foster home certification more stringently. If full licensure isn't obtained within 120 days, children should return home with appropriate safety supports in place. Similarly, when housing instability threatens family unity, adequate shelter must be provided rather than defaulting to foster care placement.

Finally, the law should expand options for removing dangerous adults instead of children when a protective parent or relative is available to remain in the home. This approach could apply in situations where one parent has completed a case plan while another has not, or when an adult poses a threat to the child or the child's parent and a restraining order can be effectively enforced.

These statutory changes, working in concert with the Family Support and Child Protection Branch transformed approach to family support, would create a more balanced system that truly reserves removal for situations where no other options exist to ensure child safety.

Ensure Accountability and Transparency in all Family-Serving Systems

Accountable, transparent systems have services, processes, and procedures that are coordinated, accountable, and efficient. Accountable systems comply with their mandates, adhere to high ethical standards, and consistently follow policies and procedures. They have robust oversight, adequate funding, appropriate staffing, and high operational standards. Children and families deserve such a system.

26 Senate File No. 716, 2023-2024, establishing the Minnesota African American Family Preservation and Child Welfare Disproportionality Act, https://revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=SF716&version=5&session=ls93&session_year=2023&session_number=0.

Provide trauma-responsive care when working with families, children, and youth

When the Family Support and Child Protection Branch intervenes in a family, the intervention will be respectful and supportive, will minimize trauma, and will not create more harm than the issue underlying the intervention. The practice changes described below, which can be implemented immediately, will help the Family Support and Child Protection Branch accomplish its mandate to protect children's health and well-being.

Streamline supports for children and youth

Improve the process of connecting children and youth with services to which they are entitled. For children with open child protection cases, develop a seamless, perhaps automatic, connection to their entitled benefits, including MedQUEST health insurance, EPSDT health assessments, WIC for eligible children under age 5, and Early Intervention Services screening for children under 3. Caseworkers, parents, or caregivers should not have to submit individual applications for children entitled to immediate access to services. Beyond these basic entitlements, the Family Support and Child Protection Branch must ensure consistent access to essential services including transportation, family visits, and comprehensive mental and physical health care to support each child's wellbeing.

Prioritize Family Over Foster Care

When children cannot safely remain at home, extended family—both maternal and paternal—must be consistently prioritized as the first and best placement option. This is current policy, but many families report this does not happen as often as it should. Prioritizing family placements requires a comprehensive approach that includes:

- Providing support to address licensing barriers.
- Offering flexible licensing waivers for extended family.
- Actively engaging relatives in children's care and protection.
- Ensuring consistent application of policies that facilitate relative caregiving.

Additionally, flexible funds should be readily available to assist relatives in caring for children, removing financial and other barriers to family placement.

Support Youth in out-of-home placements

Youth in out-of-home placements deserve robust protection of their fundamental rights, including placement with siblings, maintaining family and cultural connections, school stability, physical and mental health care, and information about the Foster Youth Bill of Rights and Pono Process. Every youth in care must have appointed legal representation to advocate for their interests. The system must maintain unwavering commitment to upholding all foster youth rights while providing comprehensive support that acknowledges each young person's unique needs and circumstances.

Create an Ombudsperson office

Accountable systems benefit from independent external oversight. A common theme throughout the working group process was the need for effective, responsive oversight of individual and systemic concerns. Most states have an independent Child Advocate office that serves as a problem-solver and a watchdog.[27] These offices have deep, specialized knowledge in child welfare systems and resolve individual complaints along with focusing on system reforms. Our vision includes the creation of a Child Advocate office in Hawai'i, staffed at a minimum by a Child Advocate, Deputy Child Advocate, investigator/analyst, and someone with experience in communications, technology, and administrative support. At least one person in the office should have a master's degree in social work and at least one person will have lived experience with the system.

While Hawai'i has the oldest ombudsman office in the country, an effective ombudsperson for children and families must have a broader range of responsibilities, powers, and expertise than is required for the Hawai'i Ombudsman Office, including:

- At least ten years of experience in family or children's law, children's social work, or children's health and welfare.
- Provide independent oversight of persons, organizations, and agencies responsible for providing services to or caring for children involved with the child welfare system, including private organizations receiving public funds for these services.
- Accept and resolve individual complaints related to child welfare services involvement, including those involving privately contracted services.
- Take all possible actions to secure and ensure the legal, civil, and special rights of children involved with the child welfare system.
- Receive notice of and have the ability to review critical incidents and deaths of children reported to or involved with CWS.
- Serve on the Hawaii Child Fatality Review Committee.
- Review system operations, including policies, procedures, practices, and funding.
- Review records, enter facilities, meet with children, parents, and system actors.
- Provide input into plans related to state and federal funding, audits, and consent decrees.
- Engage in public education and legislative advocacy.
- Provide training and technical assistance.
- Ensure that children and families are apprised of their rights under Hawai'i law and administrative rules and agency policies and that such rights are upheld.
- Convene stakeholders to examine systemic issues.
- Convene a legislatively created Child Advocate Advisory Committee.
- Regularly report on activities and findings.

The jurisdiction and enumerated duties of a Child Advocate for Hawai'i will need to be developed. The existing Ombudsman Office, the Office of the Long-Term Care Ombudsman, and statutory schemes from other states all provide models to draw upon.

27 Idaho Office of Performance Evaluations, Child Protection Ombuds: A 50 State Review, January 2024, https://legislature.idaho.gov/wp-content/uploads/OPE/Reports/r2400.pdf.

Modernize Data Systems and Analysis for System Improvement

A transformed child welfare system requires modern, effective data infrastructure that promotes accountability, transparency, and continuous improvement. This modernization includes several key elements, some of which are discussed below.

Comprehensive Information Systems

As quickly as possible, the Family Support and Child Protection Branch must implement a user-friendly, fully functional Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System (CCWIS) that meets all federal requirements for data collection and mandatory data exchanges. Similarly, Hawai'i HEARS, Ka Piko, and Crisis Support Services need robust data systems capable of documenting services that qualify for federal funding, including Title IV-E. The legislature must work with DHS, the Office of Enterprise Technology Services, and other agencies to prioritize funding and expedite the completion of these essential information systems.

Enhanced Data Collection and Analysis

DHS will expand its annual data reporting to provide deeper insights into:

- Patterns of racial and ethnic disproportionality across geographic areas and system processes.
- Root causes of family involvement with the Family Support and Child Protection Branch.
- Factors leading to foster care placement.
- Usage and impact of community resources on Family Support and Child Protection Branch workloads and outcomes.
- Outcomes from Family First Hawai'i implementation.
- Cost/benefit analyses of various initiatives and services.
- Legal representation of parents and youth.
- Use of specialty courts.
- Progress in implementing Mālama 'Ohana Working Group recommendations and related outcomes.

To support these enhanced analytics, the legislature will fund a dedicated DHS team focused on data collection, management, analysis, continuous quality improvement, and revenue maximization. Additionally, DHS should facilitate researchers' access to CCWIS data for legitimate state purposes, including helping government officials plan programs and develop evidence-based policies for protecting children.

Building a Learning System

Current data collection efforts, including federal Child and Family Services Reviews (occurring every 5-7 years), annual submissions to national databases, and the annual CFSR Data booklet, provide valuable information but are insufficient. The system must evolve to make this data accessible and actionable, enabling DHS and its partners to drive system improvements and guide policy implementation. This includes expanding race, ethnicity, and income data collection across all decision points—from initial reports through final case dispositions—to better understand and address disproportionality.

Strengthen Death Review processes for prevention

Effective death review processes serve as critical tools for preventing future tragedies and improving system responses. To maximize their preventive potential, the legislature must ensure appropriate funding and staffing for both the Child Death Review and Domestic Violence Fatality Review processes. These teams should conduct timely reviews and produce comprehensive, publicly available annual reports that inform system improvement.

Current laws and policies regarding confidentiality should be examined to maximize public transparency while protecting privacy rights. In cases of child fatalities or near fatalities resulting from abuse or neglect, DHS must publicly disclose information to the full extent permitted by federal law. Additionally, state agency planners and policy makers must have access to complete death review reports to fulfill their responsibilities in improving laws, policies, procedures, training, and practice.

Most importantly, death review findings must actively drive system change. These reviews often reveal critical gaps and needs in our system—findings that should directly inform and shape prevention strategies and system improvements.

Encourage community participation and agency transparency

Community involvement and agency transparency are essential to building public trust and ensuring effective oversight of child welfare services. While HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth Leadership Boards serve as the official youth advisory council, no similar body currently exists for birth parents or resource caregivers—gaps that should be addressed to ensure comprehensive stakeholder input.

The system of Citizen Panel Reviews and other advisory groups should be strengthened and expanded to include diverse voices, particularly those with lived experience. Community members should help assess child welfare system programs, policies, and procedures on a regular basis and make recommendations to improve their effectiveness. The current cycle of mini-CFSRs (Child and Family Services Reviews) conducted in each CWS section presents an opportunity for broader community participation. These reviews should actively involve individuals with lived experience, and their findings should be made public to promote transparency and accountability.

The Family Support and Child Protection Branch and others should clearly communicate all opportunities for community involvement in system reform and child abuse and neglect prevention efforts. This commitment to continuous improvement, driven by community participation, helps ensure the system remains responsive to the needs of the families it serves.

F. Implementation Status, Limitations, and Future Opportunities

The Mālama 'Ohana Working Group terminates by law at the end of the 2025 legislative session. During the remaining months, regular email communications will continue to keep members and stakeholders informed of progress and opportunities. While formal meetings are not currently scheduled, the working group's recommendations and collected information remain public documents, available to inform ongoing reform efforts. Several organizations and community partners have already begun pursuing implementation of concepts and proposals outlined in this report.

Current Implementation Efforts

The following initiatives, aligned with the working group's recommendations, are already in development or under consideration (as of Nov. 25, 2024).

System Infrastructure and Coordination

- The Office of Wellness and Resilience (OWR) is exploring options to continue the collaborative work begun by the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group.
- Proposals are being developed to establish an Office of the Child Advocate (ombudsperson) to provide independent oversight of child welfare agencies and services.
- Discussions are ongoing regarding the establishment of an OPEN office or Hawai'i HEARS to serve as a navigation and support hub for children and families.

Direct Support to Children and Families

- OWR and the Department of Human Services are collaborating on an 'Ohana Support Services CWS Diversion Pilot Program, which will provide:
  - Peer support services
  - Navigation assistance
  - Access to cultural activities
  - Economic and concrete supports.
- A bill is being proposed to exclude financial inability to provide from the state's definition of child maltreatment (included in the 2025 Hawai'i Children's Policy Agenda).
- A proposal is in development to provide minors in the child welfare system with the right to counsel (included in the 2025 Hawai'i Children's Policy Agenda).

Workforce Development and Practice Improvement

- OWR is partnering with Child Welfare Services to:
  - Implement annual trauma-informed training for all CWS staff.
  - Conduct a trauma-informed organizational assessment.
- A workshop series is planned to explore integrating ho'oponopono practices into the child welfare system.
- Proposals are being developed to add domestic violence expertise within CWS offices (included in the 2025 Hawai'i Children's Policy Agenda).

Study Limitations and Information Gaps

The Mālama 'Ohana Working Group process, while extensive, had several notable limitations in its scope and data collection. Understanding these gaps is crucial for future work and implementation planning.

Our engagement process focused primarily on individuals with lived experience in the child welfare system, which provided invaluable insights but left some perspectives underrepresented. We had limited participation from key stakeholders including judiciary personnel, specialty court staff, and frontline CWS workers. While some community-based organizations were deeply involved, we lacked comprehensive input from the full spectrum of service providers. Additionally, critical systems that intersect with child welfare, such as the Department of Education and disability services providers, had minimal representation in our process.

Throughout our work, questions about resources and data repeatedly emerged that warrant further investigation. We need deeper understanding of both federal and state funding streams, including opportunities to maximize federal funding and optimize current resource allocation. Both the true costs and the funding sources of the current system remain unclear. For example, we lack comprehensive data on the per-child cost of foster care, including CWS staffing and overhead, judicial and legal expenses, law enforcement involvement, service provision, insurance costs, and resource caregiver support.

We also identified significant gaps in our understanding of demographic and geographic patterns in family needs and service delivery. More detailed analysis of CWS data at both county and section levels would provide valuable insights for implementation planning. In particular, we need better data about the specific needs and outcomes of Native Hawaiian families and children within the system.

Future Opportunities

The path forward includes several significant opportunities to advance the working group's vision through alignment with federal initiatives and requirements. The development of Hawai'i's 2026 Family First Prevention Services plan presents a crucial opportunity to incorporate our recommendations into the state's formal child welfare strategy. This could include expanding the definition of candidates for preventive services, creating Community Pathways to provide economic and concrete supports to families, and exploring opportunities for federal IV-E reimbursement of Native Hawaiian cultural practices, similar to exceptions granted for tribal practices.

The scheduled 2025 federal Child and Family Services Review provides another important opportunity to advance our recommendations. This review could serve as a platform to share the Mālama 'Ohana Working Group's findings with the Children's Bureau and potentially incorporate our recommendations into federal review findings, strengthening the foundation for systemic change.

The working group collected far more information and insights than could be included in this report. The Permitted Interaction Groups engaged in particularly deep study of specific issues, generating rich resources for future implementation efforts. This wealth of material should be preserved and mined to inform ongoing reform efforts.

The Office of Hawaiian Affairs' prioritization of work with 'ohana and the inclusion of some proposals in the 2025 Children's Policy Agenda demonstrate how various partners are already working to bring aspects of this vision to life. These efforts, combined with the initiatives described above, provide a strong foundation for continuing the transformation of Hawai'i's child welfare system.

G. A Call to Action for Healing, Nā Kama a Hāloa

CALL TO ACTION FOR HEALING

Executive Summary

Now is the time to support healing, to reduce the number of children in foster care, and to end the over-representation of Native Hawaiians in the foster care system.

The well-being of kānaka ʻōiwi (Native Hawaiians) was and is intrinsically connected to the ʻāina (land and sea), ke akua (spirituality), and nā kānaka (humankind). Before contact with Europeans in 1778, kānaka ʻōiwi were thriving and self-sufficient and lived in abundance and balance.

Traditionally, ʻohana (extended family) was the center of Hawaiian society, and the keiki (children) were at the heart of the ʻohana. The traditional Hawaiian family is an extended family in which members of the ʻohana had kūlana (roles) and kuleana (privileges and responsibilities) to one another and to their lineage.

Post-European contact, the waves of missionaries, merchants, and other foreigners; the deaths due to newly-introduced diseases; the loss of land; the loss of political autonomy; impoverishment; and the loss of language cut off many kānaka ʻōiwi from their culture, spirituality and self-determination. Colonization and historical and cultural trauma have led to the disproportionate representation of kānaka ʻōiwi in state systems like child welfare, juvenile justice, and incarceration.

The Hawaiian Renaissance in the 1970's served to re-establish an identity that draws upon traditional kānaka ʻōiwi culture. This movement continues to thrive. The resurgence encompasses cultural, social, and political aspects. Within this context of resurgence today, we can take specific steps to support healing in ways that prevent ʻohana from entering the child welfare system and foster care and that end the over-representation of kanaka ʻōiwi in foster care. We can reimagine and transform child welfare so that it is grounded in Native Hawaiian culture and values. This empowers us to sustain deep positive relationships that heal and strengthen ourselves, our ʻohana, and our communities.

Historical Context

The well-being of kānaka ʻōiwi (Native Hawaiians) was and is intrinsically connected to the ʻāina (land and sea), ke akua (spirituality), and nā kānaka (humankind). Before contact with Europeans in 1778, kānaka ʻōiwi were thriving and self-sufficient and lived in abundance and balance.

Traditionally, ʻohana (extended family) was the center of Hawaiian society, and the keiki (children) were at the heart of the ʻohana. The traditional Hawaiian family is an extended family in which members of the ʻohana had kūlana (roles) and kuleana (privileges and responsibilities) to one another and to their lineage.

Intergenerational kinship care for keiki was a widespread practice. Aunties and uncles were called mākua (parents). Grandparents, aunts and uncles, parents and older siblings were knowledgeable of the geneaology of the ʻohana and the kuleana to ancestors and place. ʻOhana lived in a kauhale system of shared community houses, which made it easier for extended family members to fulfill their kuleana for keiki. Additionally, the practice of hānai (to feed, to raise a child born to someone else) bound ʻohana together and served to keep relationships strong and to ensure that every child was raised well.

Over time, the arrival of missionaries, merchants, and other foreigners systematically dismantled these connections. Foreign diseases decimated the kānaka ʻōiwi. An estimated 1 in 17 kānaka ʻōiwi died within two years of Captain Cook's arrival in 1778, and the population further declined by 84% by 1840.28

The introduction of the concept of ownership of land in the mid-19th century replaced the traditional system of land division. This dispossessed kānaka ʻōiwi from their lands and led to concentrated private ownership of land for leasing and agriculture. The growth of plantation agriculture and decline of the kānaka population led to recruitment of labor from foreign countries.

The overthrow of the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1893 worsened conditions and constricted opportunities for kānaka ʻōiwi. The overthrow and loss of political autonomy produced bans on the Hawaiian language and traditional practices and the passage of blood quantum laws. By 1902, public schools required English and instituted disciplinary practices for speaking ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi (the Hawaiian language). ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi was not recognized again as a language of instruction until 1986.

Federal policies to assimilate Native Americans included kānaka ʻōiwi. In the 19th century, missionaries received federal supports to build schools to reduce the use of ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi and to support the abandonment of spiritual beliefs and customs that were contrary to Christianity. Seven boarding schools were established in Hawaiʻi.[29]

29 Newland, Brian. (2022). Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report. Pp. 69-79. U.S. Department of the Interior. https://www.bia.gov/sites/default/files/dup/inline-files/bsi_investigative_report_may_2022_508.pdf

Disconnection from land, the impoverishment of many, and the loss of language and cultural practices cut off many kānaka ʻōiwi from their culture, spirituality and self-determination. Colonization and the historical and cultural trauma have led to the disproportionate representation of kānaka ʻōiwi in state systems like child welfare, juvenile justice, and incarceration.

Hawaiian Renaissance

The Hawaiian Renaissance emerged in the 1970's and continues to thrive. The resurgence encompasses cultural, social, and political aspects. Aloha ʻāina, a commitment to nature's well-being and political autonomy, is gaining momentum. The Polynesian Voyaging Society's global voyage of Mālama Honua drew international recognition to this remarkable scientific and cultural feat. The protection of Mauna Kea in 2019 ignited community activism.[30] Hawaiian Culture-Based Education is expanding, and it fosters cultural identity and school engagement. More and more people are reclaiming and speaking ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi. In child welfare, communities in the 1990's expressed their anger about placing Native Hawaiians in foster care into military families and the resulting disconnection from Hawaiʻi. Family Court and Child Welfare Services responded by creating ʻohana conferencing and eventually EPIC ʻOhana.

Nonetheless, kānaka ʻōiwi currently suffer health and educational disparities and are overrepresented in homelessness, incarceration, juvenile justice and the child welfare system. Native Hawaiian children are 33% of the total population of Hawaiʻi under the age of 18[31] and were 43.5% of the children in foster care in State Fiscal Year 2022.[32]

Child Welfare and Well-Being

We can do more to support kānaka ʻōiwi families and communities to build and thrive in strong and healthy ʻohana. Going forward, we can reimagine and transform child welfare so that it is grounded in Native Hawaiian culture and values. This will empower us to sustain deep positive relationships that heal and strengthen ourselves, our ʻohana, and our communities.

We recognize that kānaka ʻōiwi and Western populations experience self, family and community differently. Traditionally, Native Hawaiians have a collectivist culture. The concept of self is grounded in social relationships, and the group's goals are more important than an individual's goals. U.S. and Western European cultures are generally more individualistic. People view themselves as separate from others and defined by who they are on the inside, rather than grounded in social relationships.[33]

30 Kanaʻiaupuni, Shawn Malia, Wendy M. Kekahio, Kāʻeo Duarte, and Brandon C. Ledward, with Sierra Malia Fox and Jenna T. Caparoso. 2021. Ka Huakaʻi: 2021 Native Hawaiian Educational Assessment. Honolulu: Kamehameha Publishing.

31 Gutierrez, Keith. Office of Hawaiian Affairs. Personal communication. February 10, 2023.

32 Department of Human Services Databook (December 2022). p. 22. https://humanservices.hawaii.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/DHS-Databook-2022.pdf

33 Consuelo Zobel Alger Foundation. Hawaiʻi Programs Theory of Change (April 2023). p. 3.

We acknowledge that American child welfare practices and policies have harmed and contributed to the disruption of kānaka ʻōiwi ʻohana in these ways:

- A western definition of risk and safety may separate keiki from their ʻohana and lead to the loss of protective connections to living ʻohana, ancestors, place and community.
- A western definition of family may ignore or underestimate the role of extended ʻohana as connections and resources for parents and children. Extended ʻohana connections may be thought to be against the best interest of the keiki and parents.
- Blind spots have led to not recognizing and valuing the spiritual, cultural, community and place connections for family support as opportunities for healing.
- There is often a focus on what an ʻohana may be lacking from a Western perspective rather than identifying and highlighting the strengths of the ʻohana from a kānaka ʻōiwi perspective.

Resmaa Menakem, author of My Grandmother's Hands, points out that "Trauma in a person, decontextualized over time, looks like personality. Trauma in a family, decontextualized over time, looks like family traits. Trauma in a people, decontextualized over time, looks like culture."

Most of us working in the child welfare and well-being community have good intentions. When we recognize the contexts of colonization, of historical trauma, and of the differences between the kānaka ʻōiwi collectivist culture and the Western individualistic culture that grounds American child welfare, we understand that we can and must do better to serve ʻohana and keiki.

We can do more to support the healing from historical/cultural trauma that is essential for a thriving community. We can do more to provide Native Hawaiian culture-based and culturally resonant services and to empower ʻohana and keiki to return to their values and traditions and how they want to thrive.

Commitments to Healing

Today, we as members of the child welfare community commit to:

- Better supporting ʻohana in community and reducing the number of Native Hawaiian keiki in foster care.
  - Fewer Native Hawaiian ʻohana will enter the child welfare system (prevention) by providing community-based supports and considering cultural values of risk, safety and protection before Child Welfare Services involvement.
  - Fewer Native Hawaiian ʻohana will be involved in child welfare (intervention)
    - Reunification rates for Native Hawaiian ʻohana increase by ensuring equity in defining safe homes for Native Hawaiians.
    - Numbers of Native Hawaiian youth aging out of foster care decrease by making concerted efforts to reach out to Native Hawaiian communities for possible support and placement.
  - Fewer Native Hawaiian ʻohana re-enter child welfare (post-intervention) by better collaborating with Native Hawaiian serving agencies for continued support after child welfare involvement.

- Effectively serving Native Hawaiians in the system
  - Embracing cultural humility to better understand how cultural differences may affect and influence individuals in forming their personalities and perceptions and in interacting with one another.
  - Implementing culturally appropriate approaches and methods.
  - Providing and referring to culturally appropriate services.

- Taking steps so that
  - Native Hawaiians have an active voice in the goals and directions of their ʻohanaʻs future.
  - Native Hawaiians are represented and involved on our Boards of Directors and in leadership, executive and decision-making positions.
  - We provide mandatory, regular ongoing training and continued coaching for staff about Native Hawaiian history, knowledge and values; historical trauma and resilience; and cultural practices and beliefs.
  - We recognize historical and cultural trauma, and we employ cultural practices for healing and growth.
  - We partner and share power with families and communities to achieve these goals.

H. Online archive of Mālama ʻOhana Working Group Documents

The Mālama ʻOhana Working Group website (https://www.malamaohana.net/) is the place to access the following documents:

- Working group meeting agendas, slide decks, and minutes
- Community meeting minutes
- Recommendations from the six Permitted Action Groups
- Other information related to the working group.

I. Community Input Survey Analysis Report

This report describes the findings of the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group (MOWG) Community Input Survey. MOWG is housed in the Office of Wellness and Resilience and tasked to seek, design, and recommend transformative changes to the Hawai'i state child welfare system. In this context and as referred to throughout this report, the "child welfare system" refers to child welfare services (CWS), a branch of the HI Department of Human Services (DHS), Social Services Division (SSD); law enforcement and the court system; and related actors such as other state agencies and community organizations that comprise the differential response system.[34]
This year (2024), the working group held listening sessions throughout the state to bring community voice and community partners together to identify challenges and potential opportunities regarding the child welfare system.

As an option for participants of the listening sessions and other community members seeking to provide input for the MOWG, the working group members distributed a survey that asked individuals to share personal stories and insights into the child welfare system. This report includes findings of the survey. Though this report does not provide an exhaustive list, it concludes by linking some survey findings to recommendations previously identified by the MOWG permitted interaction groups (PIGs)[35] and listening sessions. The recommendations section of this report summarizes themes in the survey responses that align with or substantiate similar findings of the PIGs.

[34] For example, the findings included in this report reference "service providers" that represent non-profit organizations providing a range of services for families who come into contact with CWS. See a definition of differential response here: https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/casework-practice/differential-response/?top=81.

[35] Findings of the permitted interaction groups can be found here: https://www.malamaohana.net/mowgpigreports.

Methods

The purpose of the survey was to anonymously gather information based on individual experiences with the child welfare system, including CWS. Participants were informed that information gathered by the survey would remain confidential and inform the MOWG final report and recommendations.

Participants were invited to participate in the survey via a quick response or "QR code" available on the MOWG website and distributed by MOWG co-chairs at community input meetings or "listening sessions" that occurred between May 1 - July, 31 2024. The intended survey respondents were individuals with any experience with the child welfare system, including but potentially not limited to adoptive parents, birth parents, family resource caregivers or "foster parents," extended family and other loved ones of children involved with CWS, social workers or other service providers, and CWS employees. Given the broad pool of potential participants, all participants of community meetings were invited to participate.

Analysis plan

The survey data were cleaned and organized using Microsoft Excel. A simple coding scheme was used to identify themes across the open-ended survey responses. Qualitative themes arose from patterns in the stories and/or repetition, meaning the presence or absence of an idea, emotion, sentiment, or other narrative identified across multiple survey responses from different individuals. For example, "transparency" emerged as a theme because unique respondents shared different stories about the presence or absence of "transparency." After initial themes were identified, themes were then analyzed against the findings of the MOWG permitted interaction groups (PIGs) and listening sessions held in-person and via Zoom within communities across the state

Open-ended survey questions and response rates

Survey questions

The community input survey consisted of six total questions, four of which were open-ended:

1. Which of the following describes you? (select all that apply)
    - Adoptive parent
    - Birth parent
    - Child welfare services (CWS) employee
    - Current or former foster child or youth
    - Family resource caregiver or "foster parent"
    - Extended ohana or loved one of a child involved with CWS
    - Service provider (non-profit organization)
    - Social worker
    - I prefer not to answer
    - Other (please specify)
2. Where are you currently located?
    - Hawai'i County
    - Honolulu County
    - Kaua'i County
    - Maui County or Kalawao County
    - I prefer not to answer
3. If you have ever been involved with the child welfare system, what was your experience like? By "child welfare system," we mean agencies such as child welfare services (CWS), law enforcement, and/or the courts.
4. Can you describe any bright spots, or aspects of your experience with the child welfare system that have been positive?
5. What changes do you believe are needed to improve the child welfare system?
6. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the child welfare system?

Response rates

In total, **81 respondents** filled out the survey. The response rate was high, with nearly 100% of participants completing the multiple-choice and checkbox style demographic questions.

The open-ended question and corresponding response rates are as follows:

"

If you have ever been involved with the child welfare system, what was your experience like? By "child welfare system," we mean agencies such as child welfare services (CWS), law enforcement, and/or the courts."

61 responses, or 75%
of participants answered this question

Can you describe any bright spots, or aspects of your experience with the child welfare system that have been positive?

66 responses, or 81%
of participants answered this question

What changes do you believe are needed to improve the child welfare system?

70 responses, or 86%
of participants answered this question

The survey concluded by asking participants, "Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the child welfare system?"

53 responses, or 65%
of participants answered this question

Demographics and descriptive statistics

Respondents were asked to identify with as many of the following categories applies to them: "adoptive parent" (n = 7), "birth parent" (n = 15), "CWS employee" (n = 9), "current or former foster child or youth" (n = 7), "family resource caregiver or 'foster parent'" (n = 14), "extended 'ohana or loved of a child involved with CWS" (n = 17), "service-provider (non-profit organization)" (n = 17), or "social worker"(n = 8), and were given the option not to answer (n = 2) or indicate another description (n = 13).[36] None of these categories is quantitatively comparable since respondents could select more than one description.

Among the service providers (individuals representing non-profit organizations), seven had other forms of experience with the child welfare system including as birth parents or extended 'ohana or loved one of a child involved with CWS.

Among child welfare services employees who participated in the survey, all were located in Hawai'i and Honolulu counties. Service providers were represented across Hawai'i County, Honolulu County, and Maui or Kalawao Counties.

When asked about current location, 33 (41%) of participants indicated Honolulu County, 25 (31%) selected Hawai'i County, 19 (24%) chose Maui or Kalawao County, and two (2.5%) indicated Kauai County, and one person chose not to disclose their location.

For purposes of analyses and potential comparison, subsamples were created. The findings section below describes patterns in the themes expressed among subsamples labeled "families," "current or former foster youth," "service providers," and "CWS employees." "Families" include respondents identifying as adoptive parents, birth parents, family resource caregivers or "foster parents," and/or extended 'ohana and loved ones of children involved with CWS (n = 36). "Current or former foster youth" were considered another subsample (n = 7), as well as "service providers" or those working for non-profit organizations (n = 17), and CWS employees (n = 9).

Qualitative Findings

This section describes the initial themes that emerged from the open-ended response data. The findings are organized as follows: 1) experiences with the child welfare system, 2) "bright spots" or positive aspects of experiences with child welfare, and 3) changes needed.

[36] One respondent who indicated another description was coded as an adoptive parent because they described themselves as an "adoptive family for foster keiki" and four of the respondents indicating another description were coded as "extended 'ohana..." based on their write-in description.

Experiences with the child welfare system

The majority of families described their experiences with the child welfare system as negative using words like "abysmal" and as another person shared, "tragic," in their responses. Different respondents described their experiences as "uncomfortable," "heartbreaking and humiliating," "abrupt and scary," and "horrific." Some families shared about circumstances in which they believed there was no option to address their families needs other than CWS involvement. One individual described their experience as "both a blessing and hardship." Many service providers described their experiences with the child welfare system in negative terms such as "traumatic and stressful," "demoralizing," and "Negative. Dehumanizing."

Themes that emerged from responses about participants' experiences with the child welfare system include systemic problems such as lacking accountability, responsiveness, and transparency; unmet need for resources; distrust and system avoidance; and trauma of family separation.

Systemic problems

CWS employees, service providers, and families reported systemic problems surrounding issues of accountability, transparency, responsiveness, workforce shortages, and other problems. One service provider said, "For the most part, the system is staffed by hard working people with good intention but is often bogged down by large caseloads, confusing and complicated timelines, policies, and procedures that are again initially created with good intent but not efficient or [are] even counterproductive." The same service provider also reported that families call partner "agencies" for help when they are trying to reach CWS workers. Though they did not specify which staff, a service provider noted "conflicting agendas [of staff] that adversely affected the children's welfare and progress."

One service provider indicated a lack of response from CWS after multiple attempts of reporting abuse experienced by children in their program. Among families who described situations they believed required CWS intervention, some survey participants said they received help while others reported lack of response, lack of transparency, and various situations in which, in the words of one respondent, "[workers] made things worse without even knowing."

Unmet need for resources

One family described how involvement with the child welfare system exacerbated experiences with housing instability and homelessness. A service provider said of the child welfare system, "sadly, they have been unsupportive of resources that help families, caregivers, and children…"

One respondent shared strategies they employed to avoid CWS, due to fear of having their child removed when they experienced housing instability. "I housed a mother and child who were homeless in order to help prevent the child from being taken away. I have worked with a social worker before for some incidents in our ohana."

Distrust and system avoidance

Some families suggested that involvement with CWS makes communities less safe, and described fear surrounding reporting and risk of separation. One respondent described fear of seeking services within their community, including medical care, for risk of CWS involvement. Another survey participant revealed broader mistrust of government in their response explaining, "I had trusted our government to follow the laws prior to this experience and now I definitely do not trust them to do so."

Trauma of family separation

In describing their experiences with the child welfare system, many families described the trauma of having their children "taken" from the home. One respondent shared, "The system destroyed our Ohana and we struggle everyday to make up for lost time and help each other overcome the trauma caused by CWS. My other son had an abortion because he sees all the obstacles that CWS puts in place for young parents who are the most vulnerable and need the most support...."

Bright spots

Bright spots reported by survey respondents include dedication of CWS employees, communication, concrete and economic supports, and family and sibling connections. When asked about bright spots, one family said, "its all been positive but under negative circumstances."

Workforce

Bright spots described by many CWS employees focused on dedicated individuals in the child welfare workforce. One CWS worker said their bright spot is "amazing dedicated people" and another employee indicated their co-workers are "salvation/saving grace/sanity safeguards" and "sometimes my clients make this job fulfilling and satisfactory." Another participant shared that "the bright spots and positive experiences in CWS ... tends to be overshadowed by the bad publicity CWS gets."

In contrast, when asked about bright spots, one service provider shared, "Not really, I have been disillusioned repeatedly by such an important need in making sure kids get homes could be so messy."

Communication

When asked about bright spots, families described instances in which they believed CWS offered communication, for example surrounding "communication of [my] child's care and replacement home."

Support meeting basic needs

Bright spots reported by families included economic and concrete support provided by CWS. One family identified "financial assistance in many aspects" as a bright spot. Another family shared, "CWS was able to help my children with clothing, school supplies, and much more. During that time, they provided what I could not, as I was in survival mode and unable to financially support my children."

Family and sibling connections

Families and former or current foster youth reported that efforts to cultivate and maintain sibling and other family connections are bright spots of the child welfare system. When asked about bright spots, one family shared, "The CWS worker assigned to my family's case advocated for my siblings to stay within the home." A former or current foster youth shared, "The support of family connections and being creative with making contacts work" was a bright spot. Another foster youth shared, "My therapist worked hard to have visits between me and my brother during therapy."

Changes needed

Themes that emerged from the findings on changes needed to improve the child welfare system include but are not limited to systemic changes surrounding accountability, communication, and transparency; centering children and family voices, community and cultural resources, and addressing workforce shortages. When asked about changes needed, one participant shared, "To create a system that works with families and children and not against them. For [the child welfare] system to have better support and improve morale among those working within the various systems."

Accountability, communication, and transparency

Service providers recommended better transparency and communication with families and community, as well as more creative approaches for the child welfare system to build trust with families. Demonstrating the need for better communication another family member said, "Speaking of my own experience, I feel the worker should of explained to me what was going on instead of just taking me from the school and small kine kidnap. I feel children should be educated and spoken to. I mean it is about their safety."

Demonstrating the need for communication and transparency, a family said, "Be clear and truthful when asking for information. Let us know it will be documented and submitted to court and a permanent record of what [the] child said. Then let us know the consequences when what the child says and experiences is not enough to proceed with protection or services. There is no follow up or intervention services ready for the child. They go back into [the] same situation branded a liar or snitch. Almost always things get worse but now you have a child who will not speak and ask for help. Be mindful that when you folks step in, it may be the only chance to show you care and can help."

Children and youth voice and choice

A current or former foster youth responded to the question about changes needed by sharing they did not receive but would have liked to have "Connection services provided by EPIC" and "I would have like[d] more opportunities to discuss legal permanency even when it seems like aging out was the likely goal. I would have liked to engage in family therapy with my mother or minimally become educated about my mother's mental health diagnosis and how to interact with her in a positive way as I often interacted with her even after aging out of care."

Another current or former foster youth shared, "We need to help people see foster youth in a brighter light. Everyone to work together to make sure youth are supported and are capable of being independent when they age out."

Community and cultural resources

Survey participants indicated the need for sustainable funding and prioritization of community and cultural resources. A service provider described the need for better funding for projects and programs that have "the potential to save many lives" that are provided by community organizations. Some participants also described Native Hawaiian cultural practices and programming, such as "Native Hawaiian curriculum" as necessary alternatives to child welfare system involvement.

When asked what changes are needed, one respondent said "Bypass them [child welfare system]. Use only for very worst cases. Instate indigenous cultural oversight committee to do in home family work with clients. Do not allow CWS to remove kids unless absolutely necessary."

Less punitive system

Families yearn for a less "punitive" system. One respondent shared, "The system needs to be more caring and understanding. Listening to the families and understand what is being said." Another family said there is need "to create a system that works with families and children and not against them. For [the] system to have better support and improve morale among those working within the various systems."

Mental health care access and coordination

Multiple service providers reported the need for more opportunities for mental health care and engagement with social workers. A current or former foster youth also indicated they needed and did not receive greater access to individualized services when in foster care.

Removal and reunification

Findings around removal and reunification are complex, with some individuals citing removal as sometimes necessary and others focusing more heavily on the trauma caused by removal. One former or current foster youth said, "A lot of bad things happen to children and it appears that it may be inevitable in some situations for children to be removed from their homes. I am grateful for the two social workers that worked with my family and I felt they did the best work they could at that time." One family member shared, "The reunification process sometimes does more harm to the child." Another family member identified "having reunification be a top priority" as a needed change.

Resource navigation

One CWS worker explained many cases are extreme but others "merely" require assistance for the family in "...understanding what the problem was, ...knowing the proper resources, and ...empowering the family to use the services provided."

Safeguards to enhance child safety

Families and service providers identified a number of changes needed and provided recommendations for improving the safety of children placed in foster care and adopted children. A family member called for "deep systemic changes. Better screening of foster parent. More monitoring of the children. A CWS employee recommended "bring back the permanency unit" to improve "oversight on adoption and legal guardianship cases to ensure that our children continue to be safe and cared for even after the case is closed."

In line with the accountability, communication, and transparency theme identified above, families reported the need for more communication and transparency from workers on the status of children in foster care to help ensure children's safety. Service providers indicated changes needed include "more regulations for safety of children in the foster care system."

Trauma-informed approach and system

Service providers described the need for "less punitive" law enforcement approaches "when working with families and more public health approaches" including peer support and uplifting family voice and choice. One respondent shared, "I feel like if there was a way that the school would not only reach out to minors who have gone thru trauma but that there was a triage team that they could call in from CWS or other community agencies to provide forms of outreach and offer support to the family while experiencing trauma maybe the outcome would be different."

Workforce staffing and expansion

Almost all CWS employees participating in the survey indicated the need for more staffing and capacity within CWS. As one respondent said, there is need for "more workers and services for people and parents." One service provider shared, "We [the state] are funding projects that aren't very important, yet we don't have enough money in our County to pay social workers a decent wage? The system is broken. We need less park repairs and way more social workers, so they're not burnt out and can actually do their job. Our children should be treated like humans and not case numbers."

As another service provider shared, "We reported on a case it took a week to get a call back and the case worker was apologetic and sounded exhausted. We know they are overworked and this gap causes so many to fall through the cracks." One family shared, "I feel like CWS is trying their best but there is a shortage of staff and a lot of burn out for staff. I feel like there has been shifts with them partnering with service providers and the community. They are headed in the right direction so I feel like continuing this work would possibly bring better outcomes."

When asked about needed changes, a family member shared, "more monitoring, more objective observation, more experienced social workers" and another said, "more qualified workers are always needed." One respondent indicated the need to increase capacity of CWS to avoid problematic placements, "I realize there is a lack of licensable homes, but forcing keikis into homes that have no way to become licensed only creates future removals."

Workforce development and support

CWS employees shared the need for "more supports." One service provider suggested educational and training approaches for the child welfare system including, "To improve competency of social workers and case managers, the educational institutions and educators of these training program need to re-evaluate their curriculum to ensure focus is more on practical skills. Create practicing sites that gives real life experience and can provide quality mentorship that is not hindered by Practicum instructor's time or work load constraints. Practicum instructors should be vetted for competency and compensated for their time mentoring."

Unmet need for workforce supports identified by CWS employees also include updated technology. One CWS employee shared that their operating systems are "archaic and antiquated." Another CWS employee and service providers indicated outdated internal operating systems and inefficient or non-existent systems for data collection, communications, and documentation.

A current or former foster youth offered these recommendations for systemic change: "A lot of training on understanding the governing policies, following those policies, collaborations with service providers, working on retention of workers, education and strict enforcement for foster parents and service providers. I would also consider reducing the geographical elements that each worker is required to cover - break it down into smaller segments. Reduce caseloads if possible."

Preliminary Recommendations

This final section of the report links themes of the survey results to preliminary recommendations revealed by the PIGs. It is important to note that this section does not include an exhaustive list of all relevant PIG findings. There are opportunities identified by PIG members and participants that are potentially relevant to stories shared in survey responses that may not necessarily be listed below. The "bulleted points" under the headings organized by "relevant survey themes" below are copied directly from the MOWG Recommendations shared spreadsheet.

Survey themes: Systemic Problems; accountability, communication, and transparency; safeguards to enhance child safety

Relevant proactive measures to support families and prevent child welfare involvement identified by PIG members and participants:

- Develop an effective, transparent process for reporting harm caused by CW and ensuring it does not go unaddressed; no retaliation for reporting. This process must be accessible both for parents and for youth to report concerns without fear of retaliation (this is particularly essential for youth who experience abuse while in care). For example, create an independent oversight body-Office of Procedural Excellence and Navigation (OPEN).
- Develop a transparent, collaborative, effective quality improvement process; collect and use timely, accurate data to best serve families and report regularly on system operations and performance.
- Provide transparency in government operations by publicly reporting on metrics related to system performance, including funding sources and expenditures and family and child outcomes.

Though not explicitly reflected in a single theme described above, the co-occurence of themes and repeated sentiments expressed by survey respondents also revealed the interdependence of necessary systemic changes to improve the child welfare system. Multiple respondents' recommendations demonstrated the linkage between system improvements such as accountability alongside addressing workforce shortages. For example, when asked what changes are needed, one family member said, "accountability. Which can not be fully achieved until there are enough trained and caring staff."

Survey themes: Workforce staffing and expansion; workforce development and support

Relevant proactive measures to support families and prevent child welfare involvement identified by PIG members and participants:

- For all employees, require multi-cultural competency, an entrance exam, enhanced hiring and training requirements, regular refresher training with exams, coaching, continuous professional development, regular evaluation and reflective supervision, better oversight, manageable caseloads, support for vicarious, secondary and primary trauma, specialized supports to "heal the healers," and collaborate with employees to develop and implement additional workforce retention strategies.

Participants also identified the need for coordination across entities comprising the child welfare system. For example, CWS employees shared that needed changes also include "judges to understand what we do."

Survey themes: Unmet need for resources; resource navigation

Relevant proactive measures to support families and prevent child welfare involvement identified by PIG members and participants:

- Provide more comprehensive parenting supports and services for parents at risk of CWS involvement without increasing the likelihood that they will be referred to CWS.
- Address poverty-related issues that can lead to neglect allegations - housing, childcare, healthcare, utilities, public-benefits, food security, and more without increasing risk of CWS involvement.
- Ensure that families have easy access to information and resources they need to raise safe and healthy children. Provide navigation services as needed.

Survey themes: Distrust and system avoidance

Relevant proactive measures to support families and prevent child welfare involvement identified by PIG members and participants:

- Safe haven, community-based locations (Pu'uhonua) for families to seek help, including legal support, to address safety and poverty-related concerns and prevent child abuse and neglect without fear of immediate CWS involvement. These resource centers will incorporate the Protective Factors in a culturally appropriate manner and offer resource navigation for families.

Survey themes: Family and sibling connections; removal and reunification; less punitive system; trauma-informed system

Relevant proactive measures to support families and prevent child welfare involvement identified by PIG members and participants:

- Ensure timely access to therapeutic services including whole family therapy and therapy between siblings as desired.
- Provide interventions, services, and supports to children and youth that help them heal from the traumas they have endured - including supporting siblings in remaining connected and overcoming challenging dynamics related to abuse and removal.
- Focus on the family as a whole—as the environment in which children develop, and focus on the child within and as a part of the family ecosystem. This includes using family-centered case planning and processes, providing supports needed to prevent removal, prioritizing and maintaining sibling connections, prioritizing kinship care (including streamlining process for siblings who age out to become RCGs for younger siblings), fully supporting family visitation/'ohana time, and providing services and supports to achieve timely reunification.
- If removal of children is necessary, ensuring that removal is done in a trauma-sensitive, private, thoughtful, and transparent manner (i.e., not in public places or schools). If at all possible, ensure a "warm call" allowing parents and children to communicate immediately after removal.

Survey themes: Children and youth voice and choice

Relevant proactive measures to support families and prevent child welfare involvement identified by PIG members and participants:

- Expand and provide additional support for peer support programs for parents and youth involved with state agencies and "systems," and explore options for the roles and goals of the peers providing support, including system navigation, advocacy, emotional support, coaching, etc.

Survey themes: Community and cultural resources

Relevant proactive measures to support families and prevent child welfare involvement identified by PIG members and participants:

- Legally recognizing and legislating hanai, luhi, and moemoe to support family connections.
- Recognize and re-establish Hawaiian Cultural System that is grounded in practices of care and healing and is rooted in 'ike kupuna. Build the canoe house to support the family and the roles each family member plays in decision making and responsibilities.
- Including through access to indigenous healing practices and peer-reviewed trauma-healing opportunities.
- Provide interventions, services, and supports to children and youth that help them heal from the traumas they have endured - including supporting siblings in remaining connected and overcoming challenging dynamics related to abuse and removal.

Survey themes: Mental health care access and coordination

Relevant proactive measures to support families and prevent child welfare involvement identified by PIG members and participants:

- Expand access to and availability of community-based mental health services for both parents and children, including crisis response services.

J. Written comments and recommendations for the Working Group

Throughout the Mālama ʻOhana Working Group process, input was solicited through a variety of channels including testimony at meetings, participating in Permitted Interaction Groups, and an online survey. A few people and groups submitted formal written testimony via email. This Appendix presents that testimony.

- Steve Lane, June 15, 2024
- Hoʻoikaika Partnership, July 2, 2024
- Jenna Oda, July 3, 2024
- Hawaiʻi Coalition for Child Protective Reform, Sept. 2024
- Public First Law Center, October 23, 2024

K. Comments received on draft of the report

The working group implemented an iterative feedback process while developing this final report. Three drafts of the report were publicly posted and presented at meetings in October and November, with multiple channels for community input including a Google form, email submissions, and public testimony. This Appendix presents public comments received through the Google form.

Report Template and Design
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Diagrams Reimagined by
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