HAWAIʻI PUBLIC HEALTH INSTITUTE

LATE

HIPHI Board

May Okihiro, MD, MS
Chair
John A. Burns School of Medicine, Department of Pediatrics

Titiimaea Ta'ase, JD
Secretary
State of Hawai'i, Deputy Public Defender

Carissa Holley, MEd
Treasurer
Hale Makua Health Services

Debbie Erskine
ARCH-MEPS Consulting LLC, Owner

Camonia Graham - Tutt, PhD
University of Hawai'i – West O'ahu

Jennifer José Lo, MD
Hawai'i Health Partners

Misty Pacheco, DrPH
University of Hawai'i at Hilo

Justin Puckett, CPA, MBA
Humana

Kathleen Roche, MS, RN, CENP
Kaiser Permanente

Dina Shek, JD
Medical-Legal Partnership For Children in Hawai'i

Garret Sugai
HMSA

JoAnn Tsark, MPH
John A. Burns School of Medicine, Native Hawaiian Research Office

HIPHI Initiatives

Coalition for a Tobacco-Free Hawai'i

Community-Based Research & Evaluation

Community Health Worker Initiatives

COVID-19 Response

Environmental Health

Hawai'i Drug & Alcohol-Free Coalitions

Hawai'i Farm to School Network

Hawai'i Oral Health Coalition

Hawai'i Public Health Training Hui

Healthy Eating + Active Living

Kūpuna Collective/Healthy Aging & Community Living

Public Health Workforce Development

Date: February 11, 2025

To: Senator Donovan M. Dela Cruz, Chair
Senator Sharon Y. Moriwaki, Vice Chair
Members of the Senate Committee on Ways and Means

Re: Support for SB 1300 SD1, Relating to School Meals

Hrg: Wednesday, February 12, 2025 at 10:01 am, Room 211

Hawai'i Public Health Institute (HIPHI)[1] and the Healthy Eating, Active Living[2] (HEAL) Coalition is in **support of SB 1300 SD1, with amendments**, which would subsidize school meals for ALICE students.

One in three families in Hawai'i face food insecurity, leaving many students to go hungry throughout the school day. One in ten keiki in Hawai'i skip meals due to food insecurity. Hawai'i can ensure all students are able to eat by providing free school meals for all students.

Suggested Amendment
Please amend this bill to guarantee that subsidies provide every student with access to free school meals.

Half of Struggling Families are Currently Ineligible for Meal Subsidies
The current federal free and reduced-price school meals programs fail to support all students in need. Eligibility is limited to families earning below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) for free meals and below 185% for reduced-price meals, even though a family needs at least 300% of the FPL to meet basic living expenses. As a result, half of the families earning below this threshold receive no meal assistance at all.[3]

This large assistance gap leaves behind many ALICE families who are struggling to make ends meet. As a result, countless students go hungry throughout the school day, impacting their health, well-being, and ability to learn.

---

[1] Hawai'i Public Health Institute's mission is to advance health and wellness for the people and islands of Hawai'i. We do this through expanding our understanding of what creates health of people and place, fostering partnerships , and cultivating programs to improve policies, systems, and the environments where people live, learn, work, age, and play.
[2] The Healthy Eating + Active Living (HEAL) Coalition, formerly known as the Obesity Prevention Task Force, was created by the legislature in 2012 and is comprised of over 60 statewide organizations. The HEAL Coalition works to make recommendations to reshape Hawai'i's school, work, community, and health care environments, making healthier lifestyles obtainable for all Hawai'i residents.
[3] "Poverty Status in the last 12 months." U.S. Census. https://data.census.gov/table?q=s1702&g=040XX00US15

Health Risks
Students experiencing food insecurity face a higher risk of stress, depression, and chronic disease.[4] By failing to ensure they have access to meals during the school day, we are undermining their health, development, and future success.

Improved Academic Achievement
Hungry students can't learn. Providing healthy nutrition to our students will ensure they have the resources they need to thrive. Studies have shown that free school meal programs lead to improved student performance.[5] This program is only estimated to cost around 1-2% of the Department of Education's total budget and provide a 15% increase in test scores, a 15:1 return on investment.[6]

Federal Funding Increases
Eight other states–California, Colorado, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Mexico and Vermont–have implemented free school meal programs, with data showing increases in their federal reimbursement funding. In California, free and reduced-price lunch enrollment rates have risen alongside the implementation of their program, further maximizing federal support for students.[7] Hawai'i can follow the lead of these other states by implementing free school meals for all students while also increasing the federal funding we receive to support the program.

Thank you for considering increasing access to school meals for our keiki. Please support SB 1300 SD1, and amend it to include free school meals for all students.

Mahalo,



Nate Hix
Director of Policy and Advocacy

[4] "Food Insecurity and Psychological Distress: A Review of the Recent Literature". Candice A. Meyers. https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC7282962/
[5] "Universal free lunch is linked to better test scores in New York City, new report finds" https://www.chalkbeat.org/newyork/2019/10/15/21121847/universal-free-lunch-is-linked-to-better-test-scores-in-new-york-city-new-report-finds/
[6] "Equity on the Menu". Hawai'i Applessed. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/601374ae84e51e430a1829d8/t/65f390f60a673a7bf3cfeb89/1710461187562/Equity+on+the+Menu_FINAL.pdf
[7] "Free or Reduced-Price Meal (Student Poverty) Data". California Department of Eduction. https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/filessp.asp