

TESTIMONY ON HB 1854
DISTANCE EDUCATION FOR THE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK
Committee on Higher Education
Thursday, February 5, 2004

Chairman Takai and Members of the Committee on Higher Education,

The School of Social Work Master's of Social Work (MSW) via distributive learning is essential to developing a critical mass of professionally trained social workers in neighbor island communities. A major aim of the proposed program is to prepare and "credentialize" professional social workers residing in neighbor-island and rural areas with limited social services. The perennial lack of adequately trained professionals and services is a major factor contributing to the prevalence of social problems including substance (e.g., crystal methamphetamine) and alcohol abuse, domestic problems including child abuse and neglect, school truancy and drop-out, elder neglect, and those related to mental health. Statistics indicate that many of these problems on the neighbor islands are concentrated within particular ethnic groups such as Native Hawaiians.

Educating and training professional social workers is the first step towards developing a service infrastructure that will ultimately lead to addressing existing social problems and preventing future occurrences. A prevention approach that focuses on service programs designed to address pathologic dynamics occurring across generations will eventually save the State and counties substantial amounts of monies in human service allocation requirements. A core of professional social workers residing and practicing in neighbor island communities is a much preferred alternative to current problems stemming from understaffing and under-qualified personnel operating human service programs.

The School of Social Work's curriculum is oriented towards primary prevention. That is, it is less focused on addressing symptoms of a problem as it is on examining culturally appropriate ways to heal families and communities by interrupting the dynamic causing the social problem. Preparing professional social workers for practice in neighbor-island and rural areas is a prudent and cost-effective way to address social problems and the human service needs of underserved populations.

Without the Masters of Social Work program for distributive learning, the number and quality of social work professionals and programs on the neighbor islands will continue to function at an insufficient level, existing social problems will fester and transmit into future generations, and the State of Hawai'i will be faced with the mounting cost and the dubious responsibility of ameliorating highly entrenched social problems. Distance education will cease to exist at the School of Social Work without funding to support it.