UNIVERSITY OF HAWAIʻI SYSTEM
ʻŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAIʻI

Legislative Testimony
Hōʻike Manaʻo I Mua O Ka ʻAhaʻōlelo

Testimony Presented Before the
House Committee on Finance
Thursday, April 2, 2026 at 2:00 p.m.
By
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SB 2969 SD1 HD1 – RELATING TO THE MAUI WILDFIRE EXPOSURE STUDY AND MAUI HEALTH REGISTRY

Chair Todd, Vice Chair Takenouchi, and Members of the Committee:

The University of Hawaiʻi at Mānoa (UH) is in strong support of the intent of SB 2969 SD1 HD1. SB 2969 SD1 HD1 would appropriate funds for UH to sustain and expand services provided by the Maui Wildfire Exposure Study (MauiWES) and Maui Health Registry. The initiatives were established in response to the devastating August 2023 Maui wildfires, which caused more than 100 deaths and significant toxic exposures and health trauma to survivors. These survivors include children, the elderly, first responders and medically vulnerable populations.

Funding will support expanded MauiWES services and long-term follow-up for thousands of individuals, building on the existing comprehensive biomonitoring effort that has already provided medical and mental health screenings and referrals to over 2,000 residents.

The MauiWES team is co-led by UH Mānoa College of Social Sciences (CSS) and the UH John A. Burns School of Medicine, in partnership with several units at UH. The program is administered by the UH Mānoa CSS Social Sciences Research Institute and UH Economic Research Organization (UHERO).

UH and its community partners are uniquely positioned to lead this work, integrating education, research and service in direct partnership with the community. The program actively trains and employs students and early-career professionals across medicine, nursing, public health, social sciences, environmental science, and data analytics. By integrating education with real-world service, MauiWES helps Hawaiʻi grow its own workforce while instilling a model of ethical, community-engaged scholarship.

As the MauiWes program involves significant participation by its non-profit partners, delivery depends on community-based non-profit entities for trusted outreach, translation and participation navigation. Thus, timely funding to them is essential. When state funds are appropriated solely to the University, and then must be routed to non-profit partners through State procurement and contracting practices, the resulting requirements can create delays and administrative burden that disrupt time-sensitive community events, screenings and follow-up services. The University, therefore, strongly prefers that key non-profit partners receive their own direct appropriation (e.g., grant-in-aid), or that SB 2969 SD1 HD1 explicitly authorize sub-awards or grants to designated non-profit partners without triggering full procurement timelines.

Due to the work of MauiWES, hundreds of participants have followed up with healthcare providers, accessed mental health services, and made meaningful lifestyle changes as a direct result of their participation. SB 2969 SD1 HD1 ensures that this commitment continues, that services remain available to those who need them most, and that Hawai‘i remains a national leader in community-centered, disaster-informed health response.

Thank you for your consideration.