



Editorial | Island Voices

Legislature needs to pay foster parents fairly

By Victor Geminiani

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Hawaii's foster children are some of the most vulnerable residents of our state. The state has both the moral and the legal responsibility for their well-being. To meet this responsibility, the state depends on a voluntary system of foster parents as their caregivers.

Foster parents are a special breed. Parenting is a tough job. Foster families open their homes to children in need, many of whom suffered serious emotional and physical trauma. By not adequately reimbursing foster children expenses, the state is forcing foster families to dig into their own pockets to adequately provide for our children in the state's custody.

From 1990-2014, the monthly reimbursement from the state Department of Human Services to foster parents for foster children's expenses was \$529, with no adjustments for inflation or Hawaii's higher cost of living. After 24 years of avoiding doing the right thing, Hawaii had the embarrassing distinction of paying our foster parents the lowest reimbursement rate in the nation after factoring in cost of living.

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In 2007, then-DHS Director Lillian Koller recognized that not updating the reimbursement rates since 1990 was a problem, and promised that the state was “taking a serious look at increasing payments to address our greatest needs.”

Beginning in 2009, foster parents and foster care advocates began asking the Legislature for an increase, but their requests were turned down year after year. Finally, after years of being ignored by the state, foster parents filed a lawsuit seeking higher reimbursements in 2013.

After three years of vigorous litigation by the state, the DHS, Attorney General and governor agreed with foster parents to raise the monthly reimbursement for foster children’s expenses between \$649 and \$776, depending on the age of the foster child. If the state had adjusted the original amount to account for inflation, the reimbursement would be over \$1,000. The settlement calls for only a 47 percent increase in the reimbursement from what it was in 1991, a modest amount given that since that time, inflation has increased by 92 percent and childcare costs have increased by 177 percent.

The rate increase would relieve the significant financial strain on current foster families, would help DHS recruit more foster families and address the department’s chronic shortage of proper placements. The problem is especially pronounced on the neighbor islands and has resulted in inappropriate foster care placements out of desperation. Most importantly, increasing rates is associated with improved outcomes for our foster children.

The financial impact of raising the foster care reimbursement is lessened because the federal government reimburses the state more than 50 cents for each dollar of monthly foster care reimbursements. During the regular session of the Legislature, however, no funding was provided to implement a settlement that would modestly raise the rates.

The Legislature is faced with many issues that are difficult and often not easy to resolve. This is not one of those issues. Everyone involved with developing the compromise agrees with raising the reimbursement rates.

With the state's record-setting budget surplus of \$893 million, the state can easily afford to increase the reimbursements.

What it cannot afford is continuing on its current path of putting Hawaii's already traumatized foster children at any further risk. It is hard to accept that the Legislature can find the time and immense funding to resolve an issue as divisive and costly as rail, but not the minimal time and funding required to protect its foster children.

Our Legislature should find a way to quickly resolve this issue so it does not continue to drag on for years in the courts while our state's foster children suffer.

Victor Geminiani is co-executive director of the Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice; he is among the lawyers representing foster parents in the settlement.

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roadsterred
1 day ago

Can anyone tell me what the annual cost is to Hawaii taxpayers for the foster care program? Nowhere in this article is it mentioned.



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peanutgallery
1 day ago

Of course not. That would expose the utter incompetence of another state agency, riddled with corruption.



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allie
21 hours ago

In reply to:

Can anyone tell me what the annual cost is to Hawaii taxpayers for the foster care program? Nowhere in this article is it mentioned.

— roadsterred

Victor is right. This amount should have been increased to cover inflation and the rip off costs of living here. Monopoly party has failed us totally.



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sailfish2
13 hours ago

\$649 to \$776 is more than enough to pay for meals and clothing and occasional phone or computer for one child. This money is not supposed to pay for the foster parent's mortgage or rent or auto payments. If a prospective foster parent doesn't have an established home, they should be rejected.



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dontbelieveinmyths
23 hours ago

If you can't afford to foster a child, then don't. The \$500 seems more than enough to SUPPLEMENT the foster parents finances.



2 Reactions



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