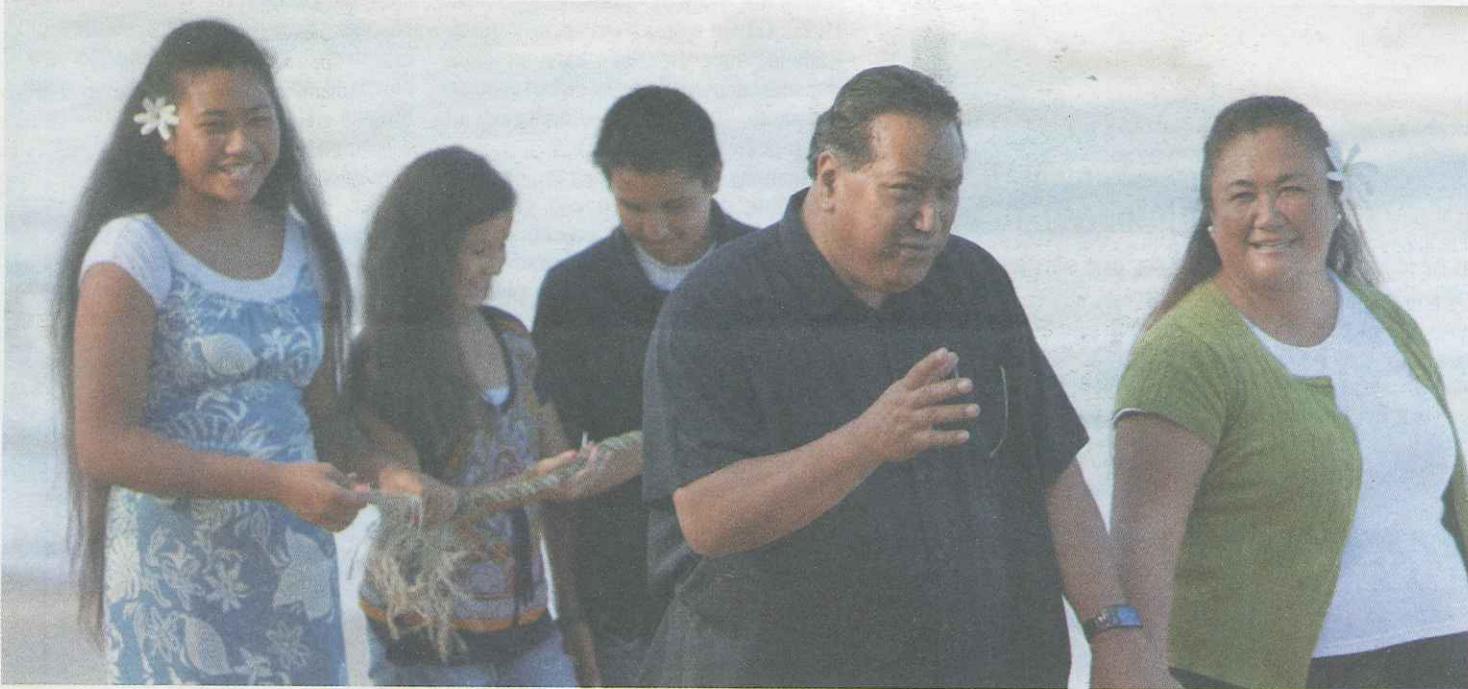


OUR keiki, OUR kuleana

Although the numbers have improved,
Hawaiians remain the majority of children in
foster care in the state

By Melissa Moniz



John and Luella Muaina with their biological daughter, 13-year-old Morgan-Melissa, on left, and two adopted children who are sister and brother, Shawnee, 12 and Joshua, 14. The family has also taken two more foster children into their care, sisters age 12 and 14. - Photo: John De Mello

May is National Foster Care Month and serves as an opportunity to spread awareness about the half-million children who are in the foster care system nationwide. The campaign highlights the urgent needs of these children and encourages everyone to get involved.

The safety and well-being of our keiki is a responsibility that requires the commitment of many caring individuals that extend beyond the family unit. This philosophy has been the focus of a statewide effort to help children and families in foster care and is highlighted in the state's Program Improvement Plan, which was drafted following Hawai'i's federal Child and Family Services Review, or CFSR, in 2003.

As a result of the CFSR, which is the single most important federal review of a state's child welfare system, the Hawai'i Department of Human Services Child Welfare Services Branch adopted a list of priorities to enhance outcomes for children and families.

Following another CFSR review in 2009, a second Hawai'i Program Improvement Plan was drafted in January 2011.

"All the states have to go through federal reviews and in the recent review Hawai'i was one of the first states to pass the national standards," says Lynne Kazama, Assistant Program Administrator of Hawai'i's DHS Child Welfare Services Branch. "In our recent review we did extremely well, especially in reaching out to organizations and collaborations with the Native Hawaiian community, which is so important because when we started in 2003 the reviews showed that 53 percent of youth in care were Native Hawaiians."

Native Hawaiians still make up the majority of foster youth in the state. However, last year's statistics reveal that the number of Native Hawaiians in foster care decreased to 46 percent. That number is hard hitting, considering Native Hawaiians make up about 25 percent of Hawai'i's population.

The decrease in numbers of Native Hawaiian children in foster care

has gone down along with the overall average, which shows that since 2003 the number of children in Hawai'i's foster care system has decreased to 1,300 from 3,000. And according to the DHS 2010 annual report, more than 50 percent of children leaving the system are reunited with their birth parents or primary caregivers.

"I think the collaboration was a big strength that we developed and has been a big reason why we've been able to decrease the numbers," says Kazama. "We can't do it alone."

Child Welfare Services (CWS) has also reached out to form new working relationships with organizations that share its primary mission, which is to protect Hawai'i's keiki.

FOSTERING PARTNERSHIPS

Family Programs Hawai'i (FPH) is one of these partnerships. FPH is nonprofit social service agency that provides statewide services to almost 4,000 children and families involved in the child welfare system, specifically foster care.

"Through our various programs we provide prevention services to keep children from having to be in foster care, we provide support services for children and families who are already involved in the foster care system and we also have services for youth who are transitioning out of foster care," says Linda Santos, President and CEO of Family Programs Hawai'i.

One of its newest programs is Ho'omalulu O Na Kamali'i, a receiving home for children entering the child welfare system. Opened in April 2009 on the Leeward Coast of O'ahu, the goal of Ho'omalulu is to keep children safe and keep siblings together while they wait to be reunited with their parents or can be transitioned with a family member or foster home.

"We selected the Wai'anae area because that area has the highest number of children being placed in foster care," says Santos. "Often the way the system works, different homes take kids on an emergency basis and one of the things that's hard is if they're split up from their siblings. So the point of Ho'omalulu is to keep families together. And we give preference to children on the Wai'anae Coast because another problem when you remove kids from their home is they lose their school and friends. It's very traumatic, so we're trying to reduce that trauma."

MAINTAINING CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

DHS has also built a strong relationship with Partners in Development Foundation (PIDF), a Native Hawaiian community-based organization dedicated to helping strengthen families and communities.

In August 2004, a federal grant from the Administration for Native Americans was awarded to Partners In Development Foundation in partnership with DHS to encourage statewide recruitment of Native Hawaiian resource caregivers. This initiative started as a response to the high number of Native Hawaiian children in foster care.

In 2010, a total of 307 out of 586 – or 52.4 percent – of Native Hawaiian children who were in foster care were placed with Native Hawaiian resource families.

"One of the most important things in these programs is to have foster children cared for by their own ethnic group because of lifestyles and familiar living environments," says OHA Trustee Oswald Stender. "And it is working."

In 2006, PIDF's program Hui Ho'omalulu became the state's general license provider for resource caregivers. Hui Ho'omalulu recruits, trains and assesses families to become certified resource caregivers to provide foster care.

"We definitely have a need for resource caregivers. We especially

have a need for families who can take teens and large sibling groups," says Stephanie Helbush, Statewide General License Recruitment and Training Coordinator for Hui Ho'omalulu. "And because of the high percentage of Native Hawaiian children in foster care, we have a team of recruiters who specifically recruit Native Hawaiian families. Formerly known as Kōkua 'Ohana, this program is under Hui Ho'omalulu now and we have recruiters that cover all islands.

Such efforts has resulted in a 5 percent increase since 2005 of Native Hawaiian families who are licensed as resource caregivers.

Native Hawaiians Luella and John Muaina, parents of five biological children ages 13, 22, 28, 30 and 33, became foster caregivers – otherwise known as resource caregivers – seven years ago.

"I always wanted to do something like this to give back to the community, so we got into it because there was a need, and we got on board as an emergency home for a brother and sister. They were 5 and 7," says Luella, a Kahuku graduate.

The siblings lived with John, Luella and their daughter Morgan-Melissa, who was 6 years old at the time, for about a year with the knowledge that they were in transition and would return to their parents.

"Unfortunately what happened is their parents lost parental rights," says John. "The two of them asked if they could stay with us. So we decided to adopt them and it's enriched all of our children's lives and has helped us too."

The Muainas welcomed another foster child three years ago. And soon after they were asked if they would consider taking her sister, which they happily agreed to. The girls are now 12 and 14.

"I don't think we are unique," says John. "I think other families can do this. It can be a real blessing to a family. It's frightening at first and can be challenging, but the rewards outweigh the challenges."

John and Luella, who reside in Lā'ie, also have seven grandchildren, with another on the way in June. They say having a big family was what they both always wanted. And they couldn't be happier about their decision to foster and adopt.

"What we have learned through this is that we can change people's lives by things that we do," adds John. "And it's been beneficial for all of us, not just the kids that we foster."

The requirements for resource caregivers include: the desire and ability to accept a foster child into your home based on the reunification plan made by the state; space in your home for an additional child and income to cover usual household expenses; and passing both a criminal and child abuse and neglect background check.

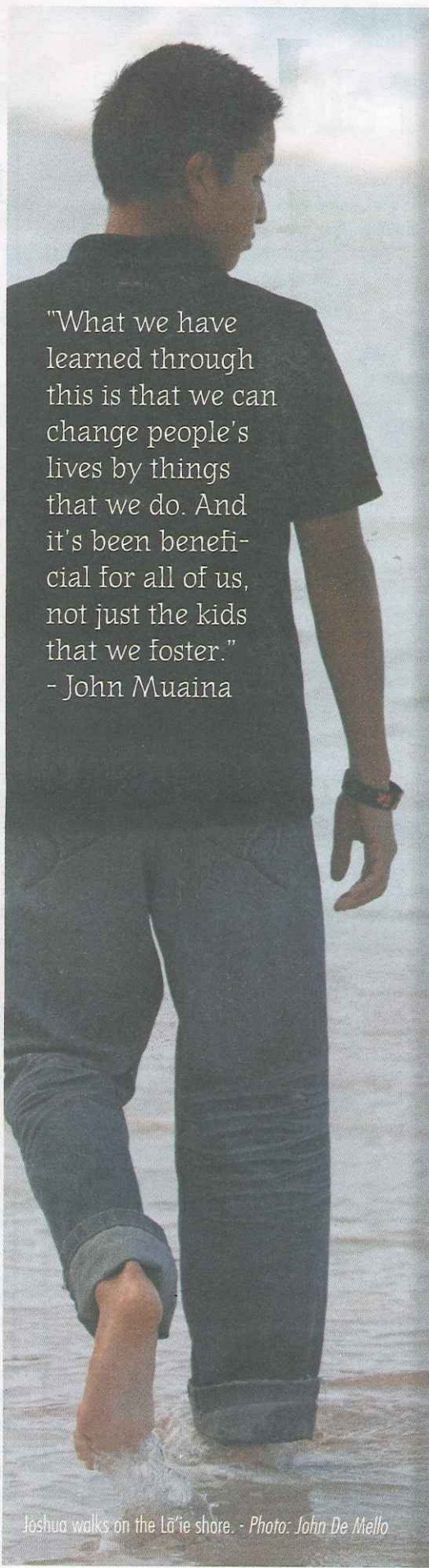
Resource caregivers are asked to support and partner with the birth parents to support reunification or relative placement if at all possible. This keeps keiki with their 'ohana and maintains the important family and cultural connections.

"What we're trying to do is build up a pool of families, so when they are placing a child they have a few families to choose from to find the most ideal situation," adds Helbush. "We're always looking for stable, nurturing families. However, we do have a higher need for resource caregivers in West Hawai'i and Kaua'i."

In addition to the many successful partnerships the state's DHS Differential Response System has been instrumental in decreasing the number of children in foster care.

"When a report of child abuse or neglect comes in, we use the Differential Response System, which assesses the level of safety and risk for the child," says Kazama. "It's one of our new programs that has been very successful. It has standardized the process and is a primary reason we've had a 56 percent drop of children coming into foster care since 2005."

The Differential Response System helps Child Welfare Services staff to find the most appropriate response to families' needs when reports are made to CWS of child abuse and neglect, which are the two most common reasons Hawai'i's children are placed in foster care. SEE CHILDREN ON PAGE 24

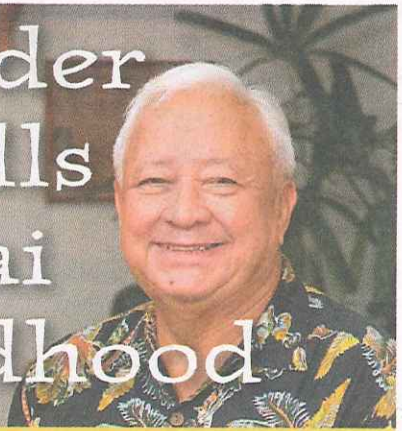


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- John Muaina

Joshua walks on the Lā'ie shore. - Photo: John De Mello

Stender recalls hānai childhood



OHA Trustee Oswald Stender is well known for being an advocate for foster children. His passion stems from personal experience.

When he was 2 – too young to remember – his mother died, and his grandparents took him and two sisters in as their hānai children. Growing up in Hau'ula was the good life, he recalls. "As my sister says, 'We were poor but we never knew we were poor until someone told us.'"

When their grandfather died suddenly eight years later, the life Stender knew best – of subsistence fishing, hunting, raising chicken and pigs and tending to the lo'i – disappeared. "That's when things went awry," Stender recalls. "Not having my grandfather anymore. Not having a support system."

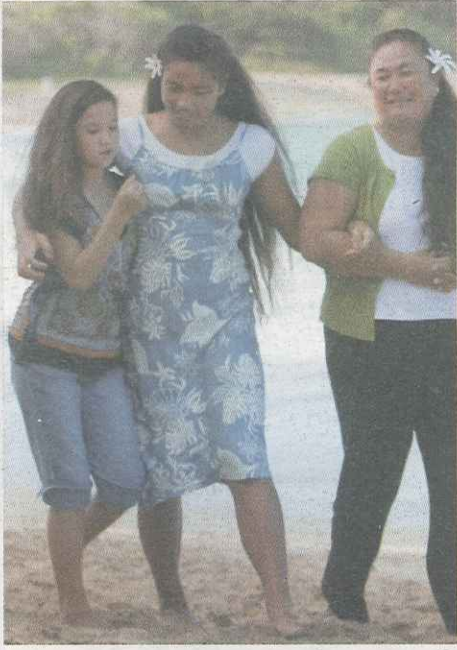
"My father came to get me. I had no idea who he was. I never saw him before. He took me from that environment to a strange place that was his house (in Honolulu). He already had a family, so I was the outsider living with them," he recalls.

"When I deal with foster kids in that age range, I can understand their being unhappy," says Stender, who as a youth would escape and run away to his brother's house so often that he would eventually be passed on into another brother's care. When that didn't work, he became his sister's charge. "My brother

was a good guy, but he had his own family, so I was the third wheel," Stender says. After awhile, he says, "You just get the sense of not being wanted."

For Stender, stability came when he was a boarder at Kamehameha Schools in the eighth grade. "I found a place for myself," he says. "I had a bed to sleep in. I had my own room. I had made friends, of course, and had a teacher who mentored me. When I got into Kamehameha Schools, that was home. That was a place where we were all the same. As boarders, we were all there without parents."

Stender would go on to college under the G.I. Bill, after noticing that those in charge at Hawaiian Electric Co., where he worked a steady job that paid the rent, were the ones who went to college. His college degree opened doors for him, he says, and his advice to youth in foster care who may be feeling lost and alone is to get an education: trade school, community college, university, whichever fits your needs. "Going to work without developing any skills is not a good idea because you'll always be in a rut," says Stender, whose career path has included Bishop Estate Trustee, James Campbell Estate CEO and Senior Adviser, and Director for Hawaiian Electric Industries, the parent company to HECO, where he worked his first job after Kamehameha. "If I can do it, you can too." —Lisa Asato ■



Shawnee and Morgan-Melissa with their mom, Luella Muaina. - Photo: John De Mello



Lynne Kazama of the state Department of Human Services Child Welfare Services Branch attributes a 56 percent drop in the number of children entering foster care since 2005 primarily to CWS's use of the Differential Response System, which helps staff better respond to reports of child abuse and neglect. - Photo: Lisa Asato



Stephanie Helbush of Hui Ho'omalua, a recruiting and training program for caregivers of foster children, says Hui Ho'omalua has a team dedicated to recruiting Native Hawaiian families because of the high percentage of Hawaiian children in the state's foster system. There is a particular demand for caregivers who can take teens and large sibling groups. - Photo: Lisa Asato

KEIKI

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For example, faced with a low-risk family situation, DHS will work with the family and provide counseling or programs rather than just taking the child away.

"Through the (Differential Response System) there's a lot of assessment done to figure out what the family needs and what they want," says Santos. "People love their children. Even people who abuse their children love their children, but they have problems, so that's how the families are helped."

In the past few years, CWS has continued its efforts to work with families to keep keiki out of foster care. It attributes its success to community-based services to strengthen families.

"We are about trying to sustain children safely in their homes and if we can't prevent removal then the priority is to find a placement with a relative," says Kazama, of Child Welfare Services. "If we can't find a relative at the point of removal, we will continue to search."

KŪPUNA BILL

The importance of placement with a relative was set into state law through the so-called kūpuna bill, which was passed three years ago. The law states that if DHS removes a child from his or her parents or guardians then DHS is required to notify everyone in the family within 30 days of the child's removal and to prioritize relative placements.

"The kūpuna bill was a bill that I got OHA to

draft and introduce," says Trustee Stender, who has been an advocate to help children in foster care. "The bill was passed in one single session because of the overwhelming support from the DHS, many organizations who were involved in foster care and of course the tūtīs who came to testify."

'Ohana Conferencing is another program offered through Epic 'Ohana that specializes in facilitating meetings with parents, extended family and a social worker to make the best decisions for the future of the child. Through the meeting, the family and social worker can make decisions about a service plan to support parents to address safety concerns in the home. Or, if the child is out of the home, they can identify family placement options, a visitation plan for parents and siblings and steps to reunification and case closure.

Community efforts also extend to events such as the Statewide 'Aha, which partners Native Hawaiian communities across Hawai'i to increase awareness regarding Child Welfare Service's efforts and discuss ways to support children and families by increasing collaboration between the community and CWS.

Last October, DHS and Casey Family Programs sponsored the second Statewide 'Aha, which took place in Mākaha. The theme for the event, "I Ho'oulu Ka Noho Kaiāulu me ke Aloha—Growing communities with Aloha," speaks to supporting the work being done by families and communities to work together to strengthen our Hawaiian families,

to prevent child abuse, prevent entry into foster care, and to strengthen the family unit so it can be preserved.

"It remains unclear as far as targeted reasons why the Native Hawaiian children in foster care is so high, but through programs such as the Statewide 'Aha we are working with partners to look at those reasons, so it's a work in progress," says Kazama. "Even though we still have a way to go, the doors have been opened with the mission to help the Native Hawaiian families and children. The partnerships have been wonderful."

PROGRAMS FOR TEENS AGING OUT OF THE SYSTEM

Proposed bills in the state Legislature would also have addressed how to better help youth who transition out of the foster care system at age 18. Although the bills appeared to be dead as of this writing, efforts continue to help better prepare foster youth for adulthood.

"We are continuing to work on legislation to improve the process of foster care children aging out of the system," says Trustee Stender.

Currently various services and programs to help youth better transition into adulthood are offered through CWS, Family Programs Hawai'i, Epic 'Ohana, Hale Kipa and others.

Epic 'Ohana offers the E Makua Ana Youth Circle that serves to help youth generate options and resources to support their goals and informed

FOSTER CARE RESOURCES

If you're interested in becoming a foster/resource caregiver for keiki in foster care, contact Hui Ho'omalua, a program of Partners in Development Foundation:

O'ahu, 441-1117
Maui/Moloka'i/Lāna'i, 268-5122
East Hawai'i, 987-5988
West Hawai'i, 896-3829
Kaua'i, 346-8184
Toll-free from the Neighbor Islands,
1-888-879-8970
www.pidf.org

Partners in Development Foundation is holding its annual fundraiser, the Putt'ng Fore PID Golf Tournament, on July 7 at Marine Corps Base Hawai'i Kane'ohe Klipper Golf Course. 11 a.m. registration, 12:30 p.m. shotgun start. Fees apply. Register online at www.pidf.org or call Karen Shishido, Chair, 524-7633 or 551-7868 or Michael Schwenke, 524-7633. Banquet to follow. Proceeds support the operation of essential programs serving families and children.

For information on the support services for foster/resource caregivers and foster children provided by **Family Programs Hawai'i**, call (808) 521-9531 or visit www.familyprogramshawaii.org.

For information on support services to strengthen families in the foster care and training for foster youth in transition contact **Epic 'Ohana**:

O'ahu, 838-7752
Hilo, 961-9880
Kona, 329-4688
Maui, 986-0750
email epic@epicohana.org

To report child abuse, call the state Department of Human Services Social Services Division at (808) 832-5115.

For information on statewide events for National Foster Care Month, visit www.fostercaremonth.org.