

## NA MOKU OLA: Issues for people with disabilities discussed at forum

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By MARY MATSUKAWA

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The 14th annual Maui Disability Alliance Legislative Forum on Oct. 22 was a rousing success with more than 200 attendees, including legislators Shan Tsutsui, Joseph Souki, Gil Keith-Agaran and Joe Bertram. Also participating were representatives of Mayor Charmaine Tavares, Council Member Gladys Baisa, the Department of Education, and the county departments of Transportation, Parks & Recreation, Housing and Office of Aging. In addition, more than two dozen agencies provided informational tables.

Following welcoming remarks by Dr. Al Arensdorf for Mayor Tavares, discussion groups addressed issues facing people with disabilities. Issues included health care, housing, community supports, veterans, education, transportation and employment. Then, a representative of each breakout session then shared the group's top issues and barriers; the positive and successes; and outcomes and desired solutions.

Overwhelmingly, lack of funding, limited resources and difficulty in accessing services due to insufficient information and knowledge resonated with each group. Other concerns were the rising cost of care and health insurance; segregated services; fear of losing great teachers; time required for paperwork coupled with inadequate time allowed to spend with the service provider and/or counselor; and the potential loss of benefits when one returns to work.

Groups also found common ground in sharing the good, which included the support of family and friends; the increasing number of businesses, agencies and staff collaborating and with positive attitudes; and the sense of accomplishment and self-esteem achieved by individuals with disabilities when goals are met.

Also highlighted were an increase in media coverage raising awareness and educating the community; the soon-to-be-opened county Aging and Disability Resource Center; caring teachers and counselors; ACCESS line; and an increase in earning power for those who have returned to work.

Legislators and policymakers heard a call to action that barriers must be torn down; public transportation must continue to expand to address outlying areas and nontraditional work shifts; families, legislators, employers and community support systems must work hand in hand to find solutions; and an individual with disabilities must be assisted as a "whole" person and to focus on abilities vis-a-vis disability. Also discussed were the importance of the Medicaid buy-in; more supports to enable people to live independently and to access recreational opportunities; and the need to reduce the stigma of all disabilities.

The forum takes pride in bringing awareness to the community and to government locally, statewide as well as nationally. Due in part to last year's presentation by a pair of courageous teenagers who spoke on school bullying, an anti-bullying legislation is in the works. Currently, a group of concerned parents and caregivers hopes its efforts with U.S. Rep. Mazie Hirono will lead to a change in a Section 8 Housing rule allowing a person to use the voucher to live with family.

Special recognition was given to the county Department of Transportation and The Maui Bus for their efforts to accommodate individuals with disabilities and increasing overall ridership. Also, the Maui office of the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation honored Jadon Chin as "Vocational Rehabilitation Rehabilitant of the Year" and Hawaiian Commercial & Sugar Co. as "Vocational Rehabilitation Employer of the Year."

An ever-growing number of forum-sponsoring individuals, agencies and providers includes the Maui Developmental Disabilities Committee; Mental Health America; Hawaii Disability Rights Center; Autism Bridges of Maui; Mental Health Kokua; Mayor's Commission on Persons With Disabilities; Department of Human Services; Division of Vocational Rehabilitation; Hire Abilities Project; Workforce Development/Worksource Maui; Hawaii Centers for Independent Living; Hawaii Families as Allies; Easter Seals Hawaii; AFL-CIO Community Service in Partnership with Maui United Way; Maui Family Guidance Center; Quality Behavioral Outcomes; Nursefinders; The ARC of Maui; Aging with Aloha Coalition; and the Community Children's Council of Maui and Hana.

Special thanks go to the Lions Club, which annually helps with setup and cleaning; 16 Maui High School students of the Health Occupations Students of America; Mediation Services of Maui; Fred Coffey; Gilbert Emata, and Friends for Ever music group.

If you would like to participate and be a part of the solution, please contact Mary Matsukawa at 984-8218.

\* Mary Matsukawa is a program specialist for the Hawaii State Council on Developmental Disabilities. She holds a master's degree in rehabilitation administration from the University of San Francisco. Na Moku Ola means "The Islands of Life," with special focus on Maui, Molokai Lanai and Kahoolawe and the ideals of health and vigor we pursue.

Aimee Bellard of Lokelani 'Ohana, presenting on the need for funding for Section 8 Housing.

