



# UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

## Legislative Testimony

---

Testimony Presented Before the  
House Committee on Finance  
February 20, 2020 at 1:00 p.m.

By

Donald O. Straney  
Vice President for Academic Planning and Policy  
University of Hawai'i System

### HB 2707 HD2 – RELATING TO MENTAL HEALTH

Chair Luke, Vice Chair Cullen, and members of the committee:

The University of Hawai'i (University) strongly supports the intent of HB 2707 HD2 – Relating to Mental Health. Providing scholarship funds for students pursuing a degree in social work would serve the State by increasing the number of qualified social workers to meet mental health needs.

Mental illness a major social and public health concern in the U.S. Mental illness is a leading cause of disability in the U.S. accounting for 25% of all years of life lost to disability and premature mortality. One in five adults in the U.S. experience mental illness, and one-half of all chronic mental illness begins by the age of 14; three-quarters by the age of 24. In Hawai'i, mental illness is a critical issue and indicates the presence of a mental, behavioral, or emotional disorder.

The University would welcome financial support to assist students in social work who are effectively trained to provide mental health services to the people of Hawai'i. Professional social workers are the nation's largest group of mental health services providers. In particular, clinical social workers have a master's degree, two years of post-master's experience and must be licensed in the state in which they practice. In high-cost Hawai'i, these scholarships are critical to many social work students who might not be able to pursue higher education degrees without some financial support, and are often forced to take loans to finance their education. A preference ranking for Hawai'i residents would be considered. National statistics show that social work students with loans have a higher debt to earnings ratio than other professions.

The strong value of financial support for students is viewed within implementation considerations. There would be some mechanical problems issues with administering such a program. For example, providing aid as a scholarship that ends up having to be repaid when students do not complete the program or do not spend five years working for the Department of Human Services will create administrative and logistical issues. These conditions effectively turn the scholarship into a loan program. While the University is willing to find ways to undertake and overcome such challenges for the benefit of having this program, these are processes that must be adequately resourced.

Managing such a program would place an administrative burden on the University to collect monies to reimburse the scholarship for students who do not finish their program or work for the Department of Human Services for five years. It is also possible that students who benefit from the proposed scholarship program could also meet state needs by working in other state departments that employ social workers such as the Department of Health and the Department of Education.

Identifying the appropriate agency to administer this loan collection program and providing for adequately funding those efforts may be necessary in the bill.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this matter.