



UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII SYSTEM

‘ŌNAEHANA KULANUI O HAWAII

Legislative Testimony

Hō'ike Mana'o I Mua O Ka 'Aha'ōlelo

Testimony Presented Before the
Senate Committee on Health and Human Services
Senate Committee on Higher Education
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By

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SB 436 – RELATING TO MENTAL HEALTH

Chairs San Buenaventura and Kim, Vice Chairs Aquino and Kidani, and Members of the Committees:

The University of Hawai'i supports the intent of SB 436, which supports and expands the mental health technician certificate of competence at Windward Community College (WCC) through the hiring of a Mental Health Technician (MHT) certificate coordinator, establishment of a scholarship program, and any other necessary administrative costs.

WCC developed the MHT certificate in collaboration with the Hawai'i State Hospital (HSH) in order to provide a foundation of knowledge and increase skills for those serving the mentally ill on our islands. The program consists of three focused courses, available in person and online. Students learn fundamentals of psychology and psychological functioning, as well as conflict resolution and communications. This allows them to understand situations that arise at work, to more effectively deal with patients and to prevent escalation of conflict in tense situations. This leads to a safer workplace and a more supportive therapeutic environment.

This addresses the severe shortage of mental health workers during a time when our State has dire needs for mental health support due to the impacts of the pandemic, socio-economic stressors, high job turnover, and a lack of workforce skilled in this area. It serves not only HSH, the second largest employer in Windward O'ahu, but also other mental health related employers such as Windward District Health, Hina Mauka, and others. Our online asynchronous offerings allow current workers to grow their skills through course offerings maximally adaptable to their schedules and further allow for this program to be expanded statewide.

The program was first implemented in Spring 2022, which resulted in two (2) graduates in the first semester; both continued their employment at the HSH with their improved skills and knowledge. In Fall of 2022, twenty-three (23) more students graduated with the MHT certificate; nine (9) of these graduates were employed at HSH. Already in its first year, this program has had a large impact on the capacity of Windward O'ahu to

care for those suffering from mental health issues and to increase workplace satisfaction and safety in the workplace.

The MHT certificate creates a pathway to further training and higher education. A one-year certificate currently under development will build on the certificate by adding clinical skills and knowledge necessary to perform higher job requirements in more advanced clinical settings. These certificates are specifically designed to advance students to increasingly higher qualifications, such as degrees in psychology, social work, and mental health counseling. This grows the overall capacity of our state to address mental health challenges and needs.

The MHT certificate coordinator position would allow this program to be made available statewide through our sister community college and partnerships with mental health related agencies and workplaces. The coordinator position can further oversee the implementation of a scholarship program, ensuring access for unemployed, underemployed and low wage earners, creating a pathway out of poverty.

This bill supports the MHT certificate program at WCC to address an immediate, critical workforce need for preparing potential employees and upskilling existing employees. It builds the capacity of our state to implement effective, supportive care for those suffering from mental illness.

The University of Hawai'i supports the intent of SB 436, as long as its passage does not replace or adversely impact priorities as indicated in our BOR Approved Budget.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of SB 436.