

Hawai'i Children's Policy Agenda *2025 Wrap-up*

Introduction

This legislative season, our communities have played a crucial role in advocating for keiki through their efforts and public testimonials. Despite the public's overwhelming support, legislators only passed 1 of the 14 priorities in the Hawai'i Children's Policy Agenda 2025. While we celebrate the victory for early childhood care and education, we are deeply disappointed by the legislature's decisions not to prioritize keiki and families in the areas of economic security and equity, child safety and welfare, and health and wellness this session. We will consider these outcomes when engaging our communities during the next election season, knowing that our collective voice is a powerful force for change.

View the Children's Policy Agenda online: speaks.hawaii-can.org/agenda2025

About

This tenth annual Hawai'i Children's Policy Agenda, published by Hawai'i Children's Action Network Speaks!, reflected the input of 61 Community Champion members. These organizations, coalitions, and individuals are dedicated to enhancing the lives of our keiki by advocating for public policy changes that promote keiki health, safety, education, and economic security.

HCAN Speaks! values and respects the diversity of expertise, perspectives, and priorities within our community of advocates. We are honored to advance the work of our peers in children's advocacy by supporting all items on the Agenda. Each initiative identified a lead organization to serve as the primary point of contact for advocacy efforts, ensuring that all voices are heard and considered.

Big Wins for Keiki

Extend child care subsidies to more working families

HB692 *Preschool Open Doors expansion* – Act 203 allows the Hawai'i State Department of Human Services (DHS) to adopt a year-round, first-come, first-served enrollment process, makes co-payments optional, removes the accreditation requirement, and expands eligibility to two-year-olds.

Community Spotlight

These successful bills and administrative rule changes, while not part of the Hawai'i Children's Policy Agenda, represent additional wins for our keiki and families. They are a testament to the power of our collective advocacy and a reason for us to take pride in our achievements.

More Students Will Be Able To Eat At School For Free

Free school meals expansion (SB1300) – In the 2025–26 school year, **Hawai'i State Department of Education** (DOE) school students eligible for reduced-price school meals will be able to eat for free. In the 2026-2027 school year, students whose family income is not more than 300% of the federal poverty level (approximately \$110,000 per year for a family of four) will also be eligible to eat for free at school. This law also prohibits schools from denying a student a meal solely because of their inability to pay.

Protect Keiki When Traveling To School

Safe Routes to School (HB1231 / SB1009) – Increases funding for Safe Routes to School. This funding will provide critical infrastructure in high-fatality corridors near schools, thereby protecting our keiki and creating safer communities.

Prevent Drownings In Hidden Water Hazards

Sharkey's Law (SB1221) – Creates a statewide inspection program that will require strict standards for maintaining stormwater retention and detention ponds. Named after 5-year-old Charlotte “Sharkey” Schaefer, who drowned in a detention pond in 2004 after rescuing a friend.

Put Hawai'i On The Path To Paid Family & Medical Leave

Paid Family & Medical Leave Working Group (SCR145) – Convenes a working group of key stakeholders to develop recommendations to establish and implement a paid family & medical leave program for the state of Hawai'i.

Preschool Open Doors-Administrative Rule Changes 17-1799

Not all change needs to come in the form of a bill. This year, advocates helped to make changes to administrative rules at the Hawai'i State Department of Human Services. With these changes, a family of four making up to \$184,896, or 500% of the federal poverty level, can now qualify for Preschool Open Doors Subsidies. Additionally, co-payments are now capped at 3% or \$45, and presumptive eligibility may be granted, meaning that families experiencing homelessness or domestic violence can receive up to 2 months of support while they gather documentation.

Missed Opportunities

Despite community support, many priorities ultimately did not pass. We look forward to continuing our efforts to pass these types of bills next year.

Economic Security and Equity for Children

Paid Family & Medical Leave ([HB755](#) / [HB695](#) / [SB852](#) / [SB1054](#)) – Would have created a statewide Paid Family & Medical Leave program in order to provide working families with paid time off from work to care for and bond with a new keiki, or to care for their own serious health needs or those of a loved one.

Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit Fix ([HB753](#)) – Would have increased the percentage of dependent care expenses that could be claimed with the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, allowing working families to get more badly-needed help with their child care costs.

Pre-K to 12 Education

Universal Free School Meals ([HB757](#) / [SB43](#)) – Would have provided school breakfast and lunch without charge to ALL public school families. Universal free school meals are a crucial strategy to ensure that every child receives the necessary nutrition for growth and well-being.

Community Schools ([HB754](#) / [SB821](#)) – Would have funded full-service community schools, allowing more schools to become the hub of their communities and coordinate relationships and resources to accelerate equitable outcomes in health, education, and employment.

Contracted Child Care Programs ([HB241](#)) – Would have enabled the Hawai'i State Department of Human Services to contract directly with child care program providers to expand access to quality child care, ensure consistent standards and quality, support workforce participation, address child development needs early, and mitigate child care deserts across Hawai'i.

Health and Wellness for Children

Water Safety and Swim Lessons in the Hawai'i State Department of Education (DOE) schools ([HB1234](#) / [SB1223](#)) – Would have funded water safety and swim lessons in DOE schools with a pilot project and a plan to scale statewide. Drowning is the leading cause of death for children in Hawai'i ages 1-15.

End the Sale of All Flavored Tobacco Products ([HB756](#) / [HB1116](#) / [SB972](#) / [SB1435](#)) – Would have ended the sale of all flavored tobacco in Hawai'i, would help break the cycle of nicotine addiction, resulting in decreasing the number of preventable tobacco-related deaths by limiting the number of youth who start to use these products. It would also encourage current users to quit.

End Diaper Need (HB1335 / SB1534) – Would have established a general excise tax exemption for the gross proceeds or income from the manufacture, production, packaging, and sale of all diapers (child and adult) in the State of Hawai‘i, a small step in the right direction toward economic stability for Hawai‘i families.

Child Safety and Welfare

Separating Poverty and Neglect (HB239 / SB1104) – Would have removed poverty from the state’s statutory definition of child maltreatment, in order to prevent the removal of children from their families solely due to poverty or economic instability.

Domestic Violence Expert for Child Welfare - Would have created an action group made up of individuals with lived experience as survivors of domestic violence in the child welfare system, as well as stakeholders in the child welfare services branch, law enforcement, the family court, and providers of services in domestic violence and child welfare, to implement a program that will address the needs of and provide effective solutions to improve outcomes for these children and families.

Right to Counsel for Youth in Foster Care (HB900 / HB1381 / SB1228) - Would have advanced the right to client-directed counsel for youth in child welfare cases with a study, planning, and pilot period of up to three years. Hawai‘i is one of just a few states that have not yet enacted this right, which has been shown to improve outcomes for youth in foster care and help them thrive.

Mental Health - Increased funding (HB112 / HB683 / SB864 / SB787 / SB1445) - Would have increased funding for mental health services, which was a top priority for the youth who attended the 2024 Hawai‘i Children and Youth Summit.

Sex Offender Registration (HB384 / SB277) - Would have made public the convictions of offenders convicted of a single Sexual Assault 4 (misdemeanor sexual touching) against a minor aged 16-18. They are currently subject to sex offender registration, but their convictions are NOT public.

Majorly disappointed? Take action today.

Stay tuned for 2026 candidate endorsements - speaks.Hawai'i-can.org/vote

HCAN Speaks! envisions Hawai'i having well-funded, family-focused public policies and programs that prioritize keiki and give them the resources to learn, grow, and thrive. We seek to endorse candidates who prioritize keiki and families through legislative action, not just talk. If elected, we will hold these candidates accountable for their commitments to Hawai'i's keiki.

Become a Community Champion member - speaks.Hawai'i-can.org/communitychampions

You'll get exclusive advocacy tools, bill tracking, briefings on legislative hearings, sample testimony, media assistance, policy research, breaking news concerning children's issues, legislative/regulatory activity explanations, and more.

Join the movement to put keiki first - speaks.Hawai'i-can.org/updates

Discover community events and resources tailored for your family, including exclusive initiatives from HCAN Speaks! You can also receive notifications about opportunities to take action, such as volunteering for campaigns or testifying on bills. Your voice is important — and we make it easy to get involved with our simple advocacy tools.

Donate to this grassroots movement - speaks.Hawai'i-can.org/donate

Advancing these critical initiatives on behalf of keiki and families is only possible with the support of concerned individuals like you. Your gift today will help address the root causes of inequity and develop crucial public policies for our keiki.

Hawai'i Children's Action Network Speaks! (HCAN Speaks!) - speaks.Hawai'i-can.org

HCAN Speaks! is a nonpartisan 501(c)4 nonprofit working to ensure all keiki are healthy, safe, and ready to learn. We give Hawai'i residents the tools to change systems and policies, hold leaders accountable, and make informed voting decisions. We are honored to be the convener and coordinator of the pro-keiki organizations, coalitions, and individuals who participated in this Agenda.



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