

EDITORIAL

ISLAND VOICES

# Column: Early childhood behavioral health must be a priority

By Justina Acevedo-Cross and Judy Mohr Peterson

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Justina Acevedo-Cross and Judy Mohr Peterson

In Hawaii, nearly half of all children have experienced an adverse childhood experience (ACE), such as family separation, abuse or economic instability. These rates are even higher among Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander communities as social injustices, such as dispossession of land, cause intergenerational trauma and play a major role in socioeconomic disparities. The long-term effects of these early challenges can be profound, impacting not just individual health and health care costs, but the health of entire communities. ACEs can often be

the root causes of persistent health challenges — from heart disease to homelessness — across Hawaii.

At the same time, the current, ongoing national discussions around federal budget reductions and potential changes to Medicaid funding threaten to disrupt behavioral health care systems that families in Hawaii rely on, particularly for young children. If federal support is reduced, it could place additional strain on already limited resources, creating more barriers to care and placing a heavier burden on state systems. That's why now, more than ever, sustained state investment in early childhood behavioral health is critical.

In recent years, Hawaii has made meaningful progress in strengthening early childhood and health systems. From 2019 through 2024, the Promising Minds initiative, led by the Hawai'i Community Foundation in partnership with state agencies, health care providers, child care providers, and nonprofit organizations, has strengthened behavioral health supports for young children and families.

As part of this work, the initiative embedded trauma-informed care — safe and supportive care that helps children heal from adversity — into preschool classrooms, childcare, and other settings. These services buffer against stress, trauma, and adversity that can disrupt the age 0-5 critical period of development. The initiative also helped expand access to mental health services and grow a specialized workforce trained to support our youngest keiki. These efforts have increased opportunities for children to receive developmental screenings, therapeutic services, and culturally responsive care.

Today's progress has been possible because of strong state leadership and a shared commitment to investing in early childhood mental health. By aligning state, federal and philanthropic funding and resources, the state of Hawaii has integrated mental health supports into home visiting programs, pediatric care, and early learning settings, ensuring that children receive the right support at the right time.



While these efforts represent meaningful progress, lasting impact will require sustained and focused investment so that all keiki have access to the care and support they need to overcome early adversity.

Medicaid — known as QUEST in Hawaii — plays a vital role in providing health care coverage for mental health screenings and services for children, particularly in rural areas in Hawaii, Kauai and Maui counties, where about half of our keiki rely on Medicaid for coverage. Ensuring continued access to these critical behavioral health services will require both sustained Medicaid support and dedicated state investment.

While Hawaii has taken proactive steps to build a sustainable system, the unpredictability of federal funding reinforces how essential state leadership and cross-sector collaboration will continue to be.

The saying “an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure” underscores the importance of continued investment in Hawaii’s youngest keiki. This includes securing dedicated funding, expanding workforce development programs to train more care providers, and fully integrating behavioral health into pediatric and early learning settings. Protecting Medicaid funding will also help to ensure that all families, regardless of income, can access these essential screening, intervention and therapeutic services.

Hawaii has shown what’s possible when policymakers, health care providers, educators, philanthropy and community leaders come together to prioritize early childhood behavioral health. When we invest in our youngest keiki, we invest in stronger families, healthier communities, and a more resilient and financially sound future.

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