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HAWAII NEWS

Groups push Hawaii political candidates for more investment in young children

By [Ashley Mizuo](#) • Jan. 17, 2022

A coalition of about 25 groups ranging from education advocates to the Chamber of Commerce Hawaii are pushing political candidates and lawmakers to support more early childhood care and development initiatives, and already seeing some success.

The idea of Commit to Keiki is to bring as many different groups together to approach political candidates before they are elected and get them to commit to funding programs for young children from birth to 5 years old.

“Traditionally, we wait until somebody gets elected, and then we vie for priority for our youngest,” said Keiki Connect leader Kerrie Urosevich.

“It’s too late at that point.”

Commit to Keiki is focused on three issues: access to child care, family violence prevention and intervention, and early childhood mental health. It is currently approaching the candidates for the upcoming 2022 governor’s race about funding programs related to these topics.

It plans to do a talk-story series with each of the candidates to discuss their priorities regarding early childhood investment.

Commit to Keiki presents the candidates with research about the benefits of investing in early childhood development, polling data on how early childhood development compares with other pressing issues and provides a list of suggested policy recommendations that candidates can choose from.

It wants candidates to do three things. First, have young children as part of their campaign messaging. Second, commit funds in the first 100 days once they are elected. Third, secure line-item budgets for specific programs and services for young children.

Commit to Keiki expects to have its list of recommended policies ready this spring.

A 2017 study by the University of Hawaii’s Center on the Family found the demand for child care in the state greatly exceeded the supply. Sixty-four percent of children needed child care because of their parents’ jobs, but state Department of Human Service-regulated child care providers could take in only 25% of that group.

Urosevich said the need for child care has only grown during the COVID-19 pandemic while supply has dwindled.

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“Across the state we’ve lost 3,600 child care seats. And a lot of providers have closed their doors,” she said.

She referred to growing research that early investment into children can save costs down the road for both financial and social benefits.

Commit to Keiki already has been successful in pushing Hawaii County Mayor Mitch Roth to commit \$7 million in federal American Rescue Plan Act funds meant to combat the public health and economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic toward early childhood care and development.

Douglass Adams, director of research and development in Hawaii County, said that while Roth has always prioritized children, Commit to Keiki played a role in driving the importance of investing in early childhood development. The county is hiring one full-time staff member to run the early childhood development programs and is still deciding how the rest of the funds will be spent.

“We really need to get it out into the community,” he said.

Commit to Keiki, said Honolulu Mayor Rick Blangiardi, also committed to hiring one full-time person dedicated to assisting children and families.

Blangiardi did not respond to requests about the initiative or his plans for funding early childhood development.

Maui County started its early childhood development initiatives back in 2002, and Urosevich pointed to it as an example other counties could emulate. Maui County has programs to help subsidize child care for families in need and is now investing in workforce development to help increase the supply of child care on the island.

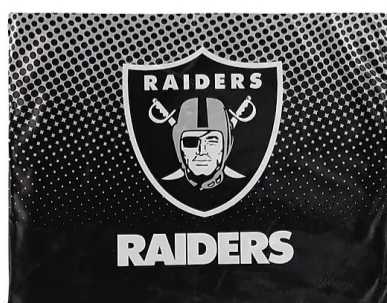
“Our facilities can physically take in more children. They have the capacity to serve more children. But our providers are not so willing just yet to increase their actual physical capacity because they can’t find the workforce,” said Kaina Bonacorsi, Maui County early childhood resource coordinator.

Commit to Keiki is modeled after a similar program in California called Choose Children, which saw success in getting Gov. Gavin Newsom to dedicate \$123.9 billion in a pre-K and K-12 education package this year.

Michael Bustamante, a campaign strategist who worked on Choose Children and is also part of Commit to Keiki, said that by bringing a diverse group of organizations together and building a grassroots effort to hold candidates accountable to their commitments, it is possible for states to see more of an investment in young children.

“Certainly here in California and elsewhere, people have said, ‘Look, we’re willing to pay more in order to make this happen,’” he said.

“There is an absolute and utter need to get this done now.”



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