

DHS HERALD

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FIGHTING FOR THE UNDERDOG

The words, simple yet wise, still echo with her today. Decades ago, Patti Miyamoto’s grandmother told her that everyone, no matter how different, deserved to be treated with dignity and respect.

Patti took those words and amplified them in her career as a compliance officer for the Hawaii Public Housing Authority (HPHA). Today, she is charged with ensuring that all public housing projects statewide are compliant with Federal housing laws.

Her mission to ensure fairness and equality is rooted in what her Japanese grandparents endured after World War II – a wave of fear, intimidation and discrimination that eventually led to the Federal government seizing their Pearl Harbor home.

The experience of her grandparents, as well as what she has seen working for public



housing, is motivation for Patti. It’s a challenge, an opportunity to help people who really need assistance, she said.

“All my life, I’ve always been supportive of the underdog, those who had to struggle the most and fight the most,” Patti said. “That’s why I’ve always been drawn to civil rights.”

Patti’s calling to public service and public housing came after many years of working as a human resources manager at JC Penny, where

she specialized in discrimination and sexual harassment. In fact, her entrance into government work came as a dare from her husband after Patti inferred that state workers didn’t work as hard as people in the private sector.

After becoming a public servant and putting in 70-hour weeks, she quickly changed her mind.

“I learned that any place you work you have the hard workers and those who goof off,” she said.

Goofing off and relaxing are words not in Patti’s dictionary as she helps to strengthen an agency that often comes under fire from the public and media because of the time it takes to fill and repair public housing units. Ironically, she remembers hearing those stories and never imagined working for public housing.

Today, she can’t think of a more rewarding job.

“The reward is helping people, whether it be putting a roof over their head or helping them to pay rent,” she said. “And the people working for this agency also feel the same way.”

ALWAYS FOCUSED, ALWAYS POSITIVE

Amid the angry calls from residents, the sea of e-mails from staff and the mountains of paper detailing every problem imaginable in the management and maintenance of public housing, Elena Murayama stays focused on the positive – helping people.

“Bad things happen, you just have to look at the good,” said this wife, mother and secretary at the Hawaii Public Housing Authority’s (HPHA) Prop-



erty Management and Maintenance Services Branch.

Whether she is at work or home, Elena anchors herself in her role as a mom. She has an 11-year-old son, Matthew.

“Being a mom changes your outlook by making you see things more simply,” she said. “When you see how caring and unbiased children are, it gives you a fresh perspective on things.”

While her good days are still sprinkled with stress and her bad days are frosted with crises, Elena said she draws much comfort and support from her co-workers. Her 11 years at public housing wouldn’t have been possible without them, she

says.

“It would be hard to leave,” she admits. “I work with great people in a team environment.”

Her sensitivity and concern for others was shaped growing up with three sisters. Elena calls herself the “softy” in the family – she was always accommodating and tried to avoid hurting people.

Some of that sensitivity was jolted in her first year working at public housing when an unhappy tenant kept screaming at her on the phone. While the experience left her initially shaken, Elena has since learned to adapt to different people and situations. She sees each day, regardless of the challenges, as a gift.

“We deal with people who have so much less and they’re okay,” she said. “Working here, it makes you realize you have a lot.”

OUTSTANDING WORKERS RECOGNIZED AT CEREMONY

Department of Human Services (DHS) Director Lillian Koller commended 70 DHS employees this past August for exemplary service and dedication to excellence during the Department's annual awards ceremony at the State Capitol.



"Our employees possess exceptional character and a strong work ethic – qualities the public expects from all State workers," Koller said. "We are proud to honor them for doing all they can to help our hundreds of thousands of clients – the most vulnerable men, women and children of Hawai'i."

Koller said many of the honorees play key roles in the Department and its attached agencies. She credited Patti Miyamoto, who was recognized as "Manager of the Year," for taking on additional duties at the Hawai'i Public Housing Authority

(HPHA) while a search was conducted to find a new executive director.

Miyamoto, the HPHA chief compliance officer, was the agency's acting executive director for nine months until Chad Taniguchi was appointed in May 2007. In addition to being chief compliance officer, Miyamoto is also the acting HPHA property management and maintenance services branch chief.

Fourteen individuals from the Child Welfare Services Division were recognized with the "TEAM Award," based on their ability to work together and creatively solve problems while delivering critical and complex services.

These employees carried out aggressive reforms that increased the safety, well-being and stability of children in the child welfare system. The U.S. government has also formally recognized this achievement, which involved carrying

out more than 350 benchmark action steps.

Patti Taketa, who received the "Sustained Superior Performance Award," was also recognized as the



director's awardee for "Employee of the Year." Taketa, a personnel management specialist, was praised for her ability to expedite recruitment of

DHS staff – especially for hard-to-fill positions.

Also honored at the ceremony were employees who had completed 10, 20, 30 and 40 years of service at DHS.

DISABILITY EMPLOYMENT AWARENESS MONTH

Governor Linda Lingle and Lt. Governor James R. "Duke" Aiona, Jr., declared October as "Disability Employment Awareness Month in Hawai'i," emphasizing that individuals with disabilities can help ease worker shortages statewide.



"Employers play a crucial role in providing opportunities for individuals with disabilities," said Lt. Governor Aiona. "The State vocational rehabilitation

system has many strong candidates for employment, and with our vibrant economy and one of the lowest unemployment rates in the nation over the past several years, we

hope to bring these men and women into the workforce."

Lt. Governor Aiona, acting on behalf of Governor Lingle, presented the

"Disability Employment Awareness Month" proclamation to Department of Human Services (DHS) Deputy Director Henry Oliva and Joe Cordova, administrator for the DHS Vocational Rehabilitation and Services for the Blind Division (VRSBD).

VRSBD provides rehabilitative services to help individuals with disabilities enter the workforce. Statewide, more than 7,700 people with disabilities received assistance from VRSBD in 2006. This included restoration services, on-the-job training and help in reducing employment barriers. Nearly 700 of these clients were placed in jobs last year.

CHILD WELFARE SERVICES WILL GET SYSTEM UPGRADE

Child Welfare Services (CWS) will receive a new case management and information computer system in three years that will help staff do an even better job of strengthening families and protecting vulnerable children.

This technology upgrade is greatly needed – and long overdue. The current system was designed more than two decades ago in the early 1980s. The new, Web-based case management and information system will benefit DHS and its clients in many ways.

When designing the system, planners will incorporate

ideas from CWS staff who will use the technology on a regular basis.

The new system will be much easier to learn than the current system. The quality and accessibility of the data will be vastly improved, which will achieve great savings in terms of staff time.

DHS will also be able to share pertinent information with stakeholders – including legislators and community and contracted partners.

And DHS will be able to fully comply with Federal reporting requirements. Most importantly, DHS will do a better job of protecting our keiki.

WHITE CANE WALK 2007

Department of Human Services (DHS) Deputy Director Henry Oliva joined more than 100 blind and visually impaired individuals and their supporters on Oct. 12 as they marched through downtown Honolulu using their white canes.



The annual event reminds motorists about the importance of being on the alert for pedestrians who are blind and visually impaired. The walk is part of "White Cane Safety Awareness Day," a national event first observed in October 1964.

"The familiar white cane empowers blind persons to travel freely throughout their communities, to engage in productive work and to realize their full potential.

Walkers began their march from the Hawaii State Capitol on Beretania Street. They then crossed Punchbowl Street, turned right on Alapai Street, right on South King Street, right on Alakea Street, right on South Hotel Street to Richards Street and ended at the grounds of Iolani Palace.

Legislators, members of the District 50 Lions, blind consumer groups and other community supporters participated in the walk. Ho'opono Services for the Blind, a branch of the DHS Vocational Rehabilitation Division, organized the event.

"With this march, DHS aims to heighten public awareness about the significance of the white cane as an instrument of safety and independence," DHS Director Lillian Koller said.

DHS WINS ANOTHER FOOD STAMP BONUS

The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) awarded Hawaii a \$567,407 bonus for having one of the best payment accuracy rates in the nation last year for the Federal Food Stamp Program. The State Department of Human Services (DHS), which administers the anti-hunger program, had an error rate of only 3.4 percent – well below the national target goal of 6.2 percent.



"It's important that we operate the Food Stamp Program accurately to ensure that those who qualify for nutrition assistance get the help they deserve," said

DHS Director Lillian Koller, "and our Benefit, Employment and Support Services Division does a great job in

that regard." Currently, more than 90,000 Hawaii residents receive Food Stamps statewide.

"It took a lot of hard work on the part of Hawaii DHS staff to achieve such a low error rate," said Allen Ng, Western Regional Office Administrator for the USDA Food and Nutrition Service. "That's to their credit, along with the leadership of Director Koller and other managers."

DHS has consistently maintained one of the nation's top Food Stamp programs in recent years. In January 2006, DHS won a high-performance bonus of nearly \$508,000 from the USDA for increasing access to Food Stamps.

STATE TO TEST FOR LEAD IN TAP WATER AT CHILD CARE FACILITIES

The Hawai'i State Department of Health (DOH) and the Department of Human Services (DHS) have launched a program to test the tap water at all licensed child care and preschool facilities in Hawai'i, including those located at private residences. If tap water is found to have an unsafe level of lead, the facility's owner will be required to take immediate corrective action – such as installing a filter system, replacing plumbing

fixtures or switching to bottled water.

"We believe the majority of child care facilities do have safe tap water," said Human Services Director Lillian Koller. "These tests will determine if individual facilities need to take corrective action to ensure their water supply is safe."

The statewide testing program is expected to span over two years at an estimated cost of \$569,000. The testing is being paid for through

the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Drinking Water State Revolving Fund administered by DOH.

Child care facilities will not be charged for the water analysis. There are approximately 1,200 licensed daycare facilities in Hawai'i, including roughly 550 which operate in private homes.