Department of Human Services

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Aloha to All!

As we wrap up this eventful year and look forward to 2007, we want to sincerely thank all the employees at the Department of Human Services for their dedication to assisting Hawai'i's most vulnerable populations, including economically disadvantaged families, frail kupuna and at-risk children and youth.

There is much to be proud of when reflecting on 2006, such as federal recognition of our success in improving the child welfare system, and the launch of major welfare-to-work initiatives that help liberate needy families from poverty.

These accomplishments and many more would not have been possible without your hard work, skill and compassion as public servants. Mahalo for all your efforts on behalf of the people of Hawai'i, and we hope you enjoy a wonderful holiday season with your families and friends.

Mahalo and Happy Holidays!

Deputy Director Henry Oliva and Director Lillian Koller

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ADMINISTRATOR IS A VOICE AND ADVOCATE FOR MANY

She is a voice for the voiceless, calling attention to the plight of abused and neglected children. Yet long before Lynne Kazama became an advocate, she was her father's student.

Her father was a judo champion who handled the flips and flops of life, with a calm, hopeful and balanced attitude. While she never quite mastered judo, Lynne, an assistant administrator with Child Welfare Services (CWS), notes the progress she's made in mastering herself — learning to have a positive attitude toward life's challenges.

Lynne said her optimism was developed by watching her late–father, who endured Japanese internment camp during World War II.

"My dad was very samurai-like — he was Mr. Miyagi with a calm, good heart," she said. "He always had a glass half-full outlook."

At CWS, Lynne wears many hats — she is an administrator, a social worker, a counselor, a mentor, a friend. Yet no matter the task or hat she's wearing, she always does everything with a smile and a hug.

Lynne continues to play a key role in helping develop and implement a statewide plan to recruit and train more foster parents. She is one of the crucial figures in the Department's push to boost the recruitment of Native Hawaiian foster parents. More recently, she was part of a team that helped develop and implement a new contract with Partners In Development Foundation, Catholic Charities and Foster Family Programs, creating a new comprehensive and integrated system called "Hui Ho`omalu" (group to protect and shelter), to strengthen the recruitment, training and support of foster families.

"Lynne inspires me with her passionate energy and optimism," said DHS Director Lillian Koller.

Lynne said her philosophy toward work and life is simple: "I treat people how I would want to be treated."

This lifelong student said what helps her everyday — what her dad taught her as an only child — is every job is a chance to grow.

"My dad instilled in me that there are no jobs that are beneath you, " she said. "You can always learn something."

DIRECTOR'S SECOND ANNUAL HOLIDAY GIFT GIVEAWAY

"Mahalo to all who participated in my second annual Director's Holiday Gift Giveaway. You all deserve prizes, but my checkbook 'no can handle.' Congratulations!" - Director Lillian Koller

These are the 7 winners for the respective islands:

For Hilo, with 87 entries, BESSD — Derrick Mukai

For Kona, with 53 entries, CWS — Susan McCree

For Kauai, with 49 entries, CWS — Marcia Ota

For Maui County, with 75 entries, BESSD — Dawn Nishimoto

For Oahu with 482 entries, BESSD - Charmaine Naauao-Ocasek

OIT—Clayton Kong

MQD—Rusnell Pascual-Kestner

Always looking up and ahead

Lois Stevenson remembers that look as a child. Not a friendly or concerned look. No, it was a disapproving look, a 'what are you doing here?' stare that lanced holes in her self-esteem. She recalls those stares vividly every time her parents would use food stamps to pay for groceries. Even though she smiled, people would frown when they saw the colorful perforated coupons.

Years later with a family of her own, Lois, a project assistant with the Office of Youth Services, understands the flawed reasoning behind those piercing looks. As a former welfare recipient, she also understands the pain of not having enough to feed her family. Yet today she is beyond the pain and the shame. Everything she has done and accomplished has been "B.S." To Lois, B.S. isn't about hot air or senseless speak. B.S. means breaking stereotypes.

"Most of the people on welfare, they aren't on drugs or cheating the system," she said. "They aren't helpless."

Lois is 100 percent hopeful and zero percent helpless. She is an individual raising two boys, Journey, 8, and Joey, 17, on her own. She is a woman with the courage to break free from a volatile and often violent relationship with her boys' father. She is the caring mother who spent her days nursing her son Joey back to health after each of his battles with leukemia.

"Lois is a woman of promise, a woman of compassion, a woman of strength," said DHS Director Lillian Koller. "Despite all the hardships in her life, she chose to move forward and better her life."

After two years working in the DHS Director's Office, Lois moved on to the Office of Youth Services at the Hawaii Youth Correctional Facility. Years after receiving help from the State, she is now providing assistance.

In retrospect, Lois said her achievements were about breaking stereotypes and exceeding expectations.

"We all have a story," she said. "You just can't look at a person and judge them."

Check out other welfare-to-work successes at the DHS web site in the SEE Hawaii Work video

Bhanot, Tsark and Medicare Part D team among DHS Incentive awardees

Pankaj Bhanot was the proud recipient of the Director's Award at this past August's DHS Incentive Awards. Pankaj, one of the administrators at Benefit, Employment and Support Services Division, also received a Sustained Superior Performance Award.

Amy Tsark, acting administrator for the Social Services Division, was awarded Manager of the Year honors. The Team of the Year distinction went to a group of dedicated people throughout DHS who helped with the Medicare Part D prescription drug transition.

Team members are: Frances Adams, Valerie Ah Cook, Christine Akau, Alma Aldeguer, Lori-Lei Aponte, Mitchel Bio, Donna Broome, Randall Chau, Lynn Donovan, Irvette Hanley, Claudia Harris, Paul Higa, Liane Hiramoto, Dr. Lynette Honbo, Renee Konen, Anita Lagundimao, Lois Lee, Alan Matsunami, Noreen Moon-Ng, Sandra Morishige, Victoria Napuelua, Tracy Okubo, Brian Pang, Lorena Paulo Ader, Kathleen Ramento, Ardean Rellin, Deborah Sales, Charlene Santee, Alan Takahashi, Leslie Tawata, Priscilla Thode, Karane Wright and Brandon Yee.

Sustained Superior Performance Awardees:

Richard Speer, HPHA

Diane Pittman, VRSBD

Richard Carlson, Staff Offices

Kimberly Lutao, MQD

Derek Simpliciano, OYS

Naomi Hamamura, SSD

More Than $100 Million to Expand QUEST–Medicaid

In February 2006, the Lingle-Aiona Administration announced the renewal of the QUEST waiver, which will use more than $100 million in new federal funds to cover the majority of healthcare costs of uninsured adults and children over the next six years. Up to 20,000 additional uninsured adults will now be able to receive health insurance through Medicaid. These adults fall into one of the State's lowest income brackets, at or below 100 percent of the federal poverty level (about $910 a month for a single person). Additionally, 9,000 more children from low-income families will receive health insurance.

The waiver expands QUEST income eligibility for children by 50 percent, allowing families who make up to 250 percent of the federal poverty level ($4,637 a month for a family of four) to receive free health insurance for their children. QUEST is a form of Medicaid state health insurance for low-income families and children. In previous years, a family's income could not exceed 200 percent of the federal poverty level to be eligible for no-cost insurance for their children.

Being used for a higher purpose

Unconditional love. Julie Tsutsui said what resonates in her soul is seeing a foster or adoptive family love a child unconditionally.

"Finding a family that loves a child no matter what, that is touching," she said.

Julie, a social worker with Child Welfare Services for more than 16 years and a pastor's daughter, refers to the Bible when she cites acts of compassion, kindness and grace. She said she strives to emulate the loving example of Jesus in every aspect of her life, including what she does as a social worker.

"My relationship with God is important," she said. "I believe God uses me as an instrument to give hope to kids."

In a career that is physically, emotionally and mentally taxing, being grounded in family and her Christian faith helps rejuvenate her love for the job.

Every day comes with trials and tribulations. Julie's work takes her to homes where children are horribly abused and neglected, without dreams, without hope. She tries to change that with every little action.

"I try to spend time with the kids, give them some individual attention," she said. "For example, if they've never been to a restaurant beyond McDonald's, I try to take them somewhere else like Chili's or California Pizza Kitchen."

Julie said one philosophy that guides her through work and life is to never judge people. No one is perfect.

"Jesus didn't condemn people, he loved them regardless," she said. "If we don't believe people can change, then we are in the wrong field."

New initiatives give work bonuses to welfare recipients and childcare providers

Anticipating heightened work requirements under revised federal regulations for people on welfare, DHS in 2006 offered new financial incentives to encourage clients to seek and maintain employment. This "Reward Work" initiative allows recipients to retain 100 percent of their welfare assistance while they work during the first two years on assistance. The program also offers two years of progressive cash bonuses of up to $8,250 for people who voluntarily exit welfare for employment, plus two months of rent payments to stabilize housing.

DHS Director Lillian Koller credited Kristine Foster as being one of the major Department players of this initiative. "Her hard work, expertise and experience make her such a great asset to the Department. She has and continues to be a staunch believer in progress and moving clients forward."

The Department also implemented the Expanding Early Childhood Education Initiative, focusing on school readiness and professional development of preschool teachers, increased access to preschools and childcare subsidies.

Director Koller said Julie Morita's work contributed greatly to expanding childcare slots and revising administrative rules that are stimulating growth and quality in childcare.

"She is always enthusiastic about her work and knows the complexities of childcare," Koller said.

MUCH HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED, MORE PROGRESS TO COME!

Mahalo to Key Legislators Chun Oakland and Arakaki

Looking back at the past four years, Director Lillian Koller highlighted Department achievements that have benefited the State's most vulnerable populations.

These include expanding Medicaid healthcare coverage and services for needy children and adults, including adult dental; launching innovative welfare-to-work initiatives; increasing early childhood education opportunities; and reducing substance abuse problems among adults and at-risk youth through new prevention and treatment programs.

Koller credited the successful development and implementation of those initiatives to the hard work of Department staff, community partners and key Legislators including Senator Suzanne Chun Oakland and now retired Representative Dennis Arakaki. She pointed out that Chun Oakland and Arakaki are key advocates for children and families. Their support of these and many more initiatives are indispensable.

"Bottom line is Senator Chun Oakland publicly and privately fought for and succeeded in retaining millions in TANF federal funds that DHS recently invested in new prevention programs for at-risk youth and families," Koller said. "I greatly appreciate her willingness to partner with me for the sake of the Hawaii's neediest populations."

Representative Arakaki was a "huge advocate" for change in Child Welfare Services and Medicaid, Koller said.

"Representative Arakaki always pushed for positive change," Koller said. "He wanted more for children and families and never settled for just enough."