

Melissa Mayo

Commission on Native Children Hawaii Regional Hearing

Talking Points:

Aloha, my name is Melissa Mayo, I spent five years in Hawaii's Child Welfare System, aged out of this system at 18. However, spending such pivotal years of my adolescence in the system has had its effects on my adulthood after foster care. As a native Hawaiian, this system was not set up to nurture any roots to people, places I call home, or culture. Before entering this system, I grew up waking up in the morning listening to my mom sing along to her favorite hawaiian songs and working on the land every morning, along other memories like getting to help my sister making our family's favorite foods for family parties, as well as watching my older sisters and cousins gather together before celebrations to make leis for loved ones, laughing and telling stories. I remember dreaming of the days of being a part of their click to learn this family tradition. All of this ended when entering the system, and would then become my home for the next five years. Even though poverty, addiction, historical and generational trauma all have a hand in responsibility for this, this unfortunately is a reality that my native Hawaiian brothers and sisters in foster care face everyday. **Over 40% of percent of youth in our child welfare system are native Hawaiian, and where I call home in East Hawaii on the Big island, approximately 80% youth in care are native Hawaiian.** Even though these numbers are shocking and sometimes heartbreaking, it also means we have tons of responsibility and privilege of rewriting these numbers.

In spite of this, I proud to say that I have been given the opportunity to be apart of some the great work that has being being done:

- Having a place on our HI H.O.P.E.S. Youth leadership board that is composed of current and former young people in foster care, which now 86% of those young people who sit on our board are Native Hawaiian.
- As of 2018, we now foster a youth bill of rights that protects young people's rights to family visitation, young people staying in their communities, and giving young people the right to be connected to culture.
- Also, as of July 2020, we know of the grievance process, which we call the Pono Process to make sure the rights of young people are being honored and upheld. I also have the privilege of helping to lead this work as the Pono Process Lead.
- The work Na Kama a Haloa Initiative, which focuses on connecting Native Hawaiian children and youth in the foster care system to healthy, supportive, and enriching relationships. It was through this work that I was able to use my experience with my mom to help advocate for the importance of keeping biological parents and youth in care connected.

Some of my recommendations:

- Continue to support community partnerships and initiatives, like Na kama a Haloa.
- Continue to lift up the voices of young people with lived experience, but also parents who are impacted by the child welfare system.
- Finding cultural ways to connect families together to promote healing and strengthen their bonds to each other.
- Continuing to create opportunities for young people who enter the system to form lasting relationships, with people, places they call home, and culture.