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Child Advocacy Groups Hope to Fill Gaps in Services Amid Steep Budget Cuts

By ASHLEY MIZUO • FEB 2, 2021

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The state faces steep budget cuts due to the COVID-19 pandemic--and that may include education.

Children advocacy groups hope to fill the gaps in services and find new ways to generate funds for those programs.

A top concern for advocates is how COVID-19 has highlighted inequalities for Hawaii's children.

"With COVID, we really saw the impact of our lack of investment in some of our social service safety nets, in our education safety net, and in our programs for working families," Hawaii Children's Action Network's Executive Director Deborah Zysman said.

HCAN's top two priorities in 2021 are avoiding cuts to education and health and human services funding and creating support for working families.

That means preserving preventative outreach to families, and childcare support as well as advocating for programs like paid family leave.

However, finding funding for these initiatives will be important.

The Progressive Tax Coalition is proposing 11 different taxes they hope state legislators will look at to avoid cutting department budgets. Options range from a tax on vaping and surgery drinks-- to increasing taxes on inheritances.

"Our reasoning for it is to not see cuts to things like DOE," Zysman said.

Zysman's referring to the potential \$141 million cut to the state department of education.

That would include job losses for teachers and other services like art and afterschool programs.

Paula Adams with Hawaii Afterschool Alliance is hoping to preserve the only state funded after school program, REACH which targets middle school students.

She said other programs from the alliance helped fill gaps during the pandemic.

"After school programs and summer programs, and Community Learning Centers can provide those extra services that the schools use to provide," she said.

"A lot of our after school programs and community organizations during the pandemic, were providing meals for our kids and families. Some of our programs, were doing regular wellness check in with our kids. And so they're and also to provide a safe place for our kids to be able to engage in the learning

process these places sometimes provide access to internet provide devices, but most importantly, provide someone who is there to work with the kids through through the school day when they went campus were closed.”

Zysman warned that non-profits are also looking at cuts.

“Most of the nonprofits, if you think about how they're providing social services, there are also on government money. So it's the same pot of money, right?” she said.

“If you have a social service agency providing the service, they are also very concerned, because they provide also government support services to our community.”

A report from the Hawaii Budget Policy Center found that Governor David Ige’s proposed 10% cut to contracts for nonprofit services would result in an 86 million dollar blow to the state’s economy.

In the event that more funding is not secured, Zysman thought the state should focus on preserving programs that receive federal funds.

“Many of Hawaii's programs and social services are a partnership with state money and federal money,” shes said.

“In order to get the federal money, the state has to invest a certain amount of money upfront. So our biggest priority is making sure that whether it's health human services or education funding, that Hawaii at least puts in its share, so that we can continue getting the federal money.”

However she and Adams hope that proposed new state tax revenue and the possibility of more funding from a federal stimulus package will help avoid cuts to children services all together.

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