

# Column: Afterschool-care providers overwhelmed

By Paula Adams • Today • Updated 6:21 p.m.

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Hawaii’s biggest afterschool providers are facing a staffing crunch, and it’s creating havoc for thousands of families across the islands. At last count, more than 3,425 keiki were on afterschool waiting lists at five of the state’s biggest afterschool providers. The problem isn’t that the programs aren’t eager to serve those deserving kids; they’re having a hard time hiring qualified staff.

Not long ago, the Hawai’i Afterschool Alliance received an email from a parent who describes the challenge:

“Aloha! I am desperate for help/guidance. I have a 2nd grader in Mililani Waena Elementary. The ONLY afterschool program I can find is through the YMCA’s A+ program. We are currently 30+ in line on the waitlist. We are a two-working-parent household. I don’t know what to do ... ”

A number of issues appear to be combining to cause the problem. But for afterschool leaders, one issue stands out: they’re losing potential employees to higher-paying jobs. It doesn’t take a lot to earn more than an entry-level afterschool staff member. Many fast-food restaurants offer wages comparable or better.

Jacque Shin, Kama’aina Kids school age manager, tells the story from the perspective of a provider desperate to meet the needs of just such families:

“With more than 500 children for Kama’aina Kids afterschool sites on a waiting list for afterschool care, we are finding ourselves in the MOST DIRE staffing situation we have ever had to face in our 33 years of operation in Hawaii. These families do not have childcare because we cannot adequately staff our afterschool programs despite monumental efforts on our part to do so.”

The problem, Shin goes on to explain, was trying to hire 300 new staff members while competing “with other businesses that can offer higher wages or full-time work.” That effort is greatly complicated because their income stream is limited by the low program fee set by the Hawaii Department of Education that does not cover the actual cost of the program. In short, they’re not able to offer prospective employees a competitive wage.

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Increasing program fees and leveraging TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) reserve funds to cover the cost of the increase would go a long way to solving the problem — programs will be able to offer competitive wages and working families won’t have to pay higher monthly fees.

Other afterschool programs like the Nita M. Lowey 21st Century Community Learning Centers and nonschool-based programs are also struggling to hire qualified staff due to lack of funding. However, the federal government has offered a helping hand that we should be sure to grasp. The American Rescue Plan, which includes Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) III and child care funding, both provide emergency funding for afterschool and summer learning programs. The state Department of Education and Department of Human Services need to quickly make those funds available to afterschool programs, so that kids and families can benefit.

Throughout the course of this horrible pandemic, afterschool and summer learning programs have been true heroes. Many stayed open for in-person sessions at the height of the shutdown to look after essential workers' children. When schools went virtual, many afterschool programs stayed physically open all day, serving children too young to be left alone at home without adult supervision to keep them safe and on task.

Now that schools are opening in full, and the economy is recovering, we need afterschool programs to be at full strength so that they can continue their vital service to children and families.

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**Paula Adams is executive director of the Hawai'i Afterschool Alliance.**

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