



Written Testimony of Kupu to the Honolulu City Council

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Before the: Full Council
Agenda Item: Bill 13, CD2 Grants in Aid Funds
Testifier: John Leong, Chief Executive Officer of Kupu

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Chair Martin and Members of the Honolulu City Council:

Kupu is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization dedicated to empowering youth and youth-at-risk through character-building, service-learning, and environmental stewardship opportunities while at the same time completing important environmental initiatives benefitting over 80 partner organizations across the state. We utilize a culturally based approach which simultaneously benefits our youth members, the environment, and the community.

As a recipient of 2014-2015 Grant in Aid from the City and County of Honolulu, Kupu's CommunityU program has successfully drawn on outdoor environmental service work and Hawaiian cultural activities to re-engage and build character in local at-risk youth ages 16-24 on Oahu. Members come from all parts of the island and include high school dropouts, court-appointed youth, homeless, recent migrants, low-income, and those lacking parental support.

CommunityU provides a full-time, 8-week field internship experience where members serve outdoors to support a variety of environmental conservation projects throughout the island in addition to being exposed to educational and career opportunities via workshops, guest speakers, and field trips. A highlight for many of the youth is the tour of a local college, which has helped to inspire many of our alumni to enroll in college to pursue their degrees. Kupu partners with the Department of Education to provide members who did not finish high school an opportunity to earn a Competency-Based (C-Base) Community School Diploma.

At Kupu's facility in Kewalo Basin, Kakaako, members gain a strong and nurturing support network to help them successfully face life challenges, earn their diploma, and learn vital job skills in pursuit of a more positive and productive life path. Of CommunityU members in 2014:

- 84% would have been unemployed if not in the program
Of this group, 81% became employed within a year after leaving Kupu
63% did not finish high school
Of these drop-outs, 80% successfully earned their diploma at CommunityU
32% have enrolled in further schooling or plan to continue their education



With support from the City and County of Honolulu, the CommunityU program can continue to transform the lives of at-risk youth on Oahu. One example is the story of a youth named Brian who was referred to CommunityU by his high school counselor one year ago. Unable to focus on academics after suffering a personal tragedy, Brian failed the 9<sup>th</sup> grade twice and was released since he would not be able to earn enough credits to graduate high school in time. Because of his interest in working with his hands and learning about the environment, Brian enrolled in Kupu. He served 164 hours in the field and helped his team clear 3,440 square feet of invasive species and out-plant 107 native plants. Brian's hard work earned him the title of his team's Most Outstanding Member. Likewise, Brian proved to be an exceptional student in the classroom at CommunityU's diploma program.

Brian returned to Kupu to volunteer on a variety of different projects, including feeding the homeless of Kaka'ako. He was most recently tasked with patching the poi board his team made before it was donated, which embodies his attention to detail and trust the staff have in him. With a diploma in hand and life experience under his belt, Brian learned in late May that he was accepted into Leeward Community College's where he will be studying in the Automotive Technology Program this fall. Until then, he is continuing to volunteer and receive mentoring at CommunityU each week.

A Grant in Aid for 2015-2016 would help Kupu acquire additional funding from other organizations to support the CommunityU program. Funds awarded would be spent judiciously and Kupu has been designated as a low risk nonprofit because it has no audit findings for three or more consecutive years.

The CommunityU program fulfills a vital need in the community. In Hawaii, evidence indicates that slightly more than half of our youth between ages of 16-24 were unemployed in 2012, which represents an 11% decrease in the number of working youth since 2000 (Youth and Work, 2012). the societal costs associated with these at-risk youth, who often come from low socioeconomic backgrounds with few role models of working adults, have wide-ranging effects that impact everyone in the community. Hawaii is ranked 44<sup>th</sup> in the nation with only 67.2% of students entering the 9<sup>th</sup> grade successfully completing high school and graduating in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade (Hawaii Free Press, 2013). If we were to increase the graduation rate by just 5%, Hawaii's economy would benefit from a combination of savings due to reduced crime and spending and \$18 million in revenue associated with increased earnings (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). Too many of our youth are unable to find success within the traditional educational models, and are left without the support or resources necessary to earn their high school diplomas or successfully enter the workforce. Without viable pathways to support our keiki, many of them will be left behind.