

WHAT'S HAPPENING AT THE LEGISLATURE

March 2009

Civil Unions

It grabbed the headlines of both newspapers, that's for sure. Civil unions, HB 444, is the most controversial issue of the Session so far. We are getting inundated by e-mails, regular mail, faxes, and phone calls, both for and against. Roughly 1400 people submitted testimony to the Senate hearing which started at 9 am. A little over an hour and a half later, Judiciary Chair Brian Taniguchi announced the good news: they had reached the end of the first page of the list of testifiers. The bad news: there were still 46 more pages to go. After a 2 hour break for the Senate floor session and lunch, the hearing with all of its hundreds of testifiers, continued on until 3:15 in the morning.

The Judiciary committee was deadlocked, 3-3, on whether to pass the bill out of the committee to the Senate floor. The bill is now in the Committee and will not go out to the Senate floor for a vote unless there is a call for it by enough senators.

Prescriptive Rights

SB 428, which would give prescriptive authority to qualified psychologists who practice at a federally qualified health center, passed with amendments out of the Commerce and Consumer Protection Committee and will go to the Senate floor for a vote. Similar measures had been introduced in past sessions but had been vigorously opposed by psychiatrists.

The bill arose because mental health needs outweigh the availability of services. More people died from suicide than from automobile accidents or homicides during 2000-2004. Hawaii's suicide rate, at 22.5%, is higher than the national average. The most common reasons include depression, relationship problems, and serious medical problems, which are conditions occurring at significantly high rates in the general population.

The neighbor islands are pushing for the bill's passage because of the scarcity of psychiatrists in rural areas. Tripler Army Medical Center has trained 20 Hawaii born psychologists since 2000. These psychologists collaborate with doctors to render behavioral health care to underserved populations at a native Hawaiian health care clinic on Molokai and at federally qualified health centers on the neighbor islands at Bay Clinic, Hana, Molokai, Kauai, West Hawaii, and underserved Oahu areas in Waianae, Kalihi-Palama, Waimanalo, Ko'olauloa, Kokua Kalihi Valley, and Waikiki.

The federal government currently permits psychologists with appropriate credentials to prescribe medicines to active duty military personnel and their families, as does the Indian

Health Services. Louisiana and New Mexico also granted prescriptive rights to appropriately trained psychologists.

The issue has been coming before the Legislature for years now, with the familiar arguments revolving around patient safety versus the dire need for access to care.

Energy

Several of my energy bills are going forward in the Senate. SB 552 would require all newly purchased or leased light-duty vehicles to have a fuel economy of at least 18 miles per gallon. Both the Energy & Environment Committee and the Transportation, International and Intergovernmental Affairs Committee passed the bills out of their committee. The bill will now go to the Senate floor for a vote.

SB 553 would help reduce energy waste by requiring the use of compact fluorescent light bulbs, LED bulbs, and advanced energy-efficient incandescent light bulbs in state buildings. The bill has passed all three committees (Energy & Environment, Judiciary & Government Operations, and Ways & Means) and will go to the Senate for a full vote.

SB 555 would direct the Department of Business & Economic Development to adopt appliance energy efficiency rules similar to that of California's Appliance Efficiency Regulations, and requires that appliances sold as of January 1, 2013 meet those standards. California adopted these regulations more than a decade ago. While the electricity usage in the country has escalated an average of 50%, California's energy efficiency standards have helped its usage stay flat. California enjoys one of the lowest five per capita energy utilization rates in the country. Hawaii residents would greatly benefit by having this drop in their electricity bills.

Aerospace Advisory Committee

SB 537 would create an aerospace advisory committee to assist the legislature and state agencies in developing the aerospace industry in Hawaii. The bill is up for a vote before the Senate Ways and Means Committee this week. The committee would also track national and global trends and priorities in aerospace development; identify and promote opportunities to expand and diversify aerospace development and aerospace-related industries; and support networking with national and international agencies, institutions and organizations to develop private-public partnerships to support the growth of this industry.

It's an exciting year at the Legislature, with many ideas for improving the state being discussed with vigor by the many persons testifying. You can view the many bills before the House and Senate at www.capitol.hawaii.gov.