National Reunification Month Event

On June 26, 2013, the State of Hawai‘i held its first ever National Reunification Month event. National Reunification Month, recognized by the American Bar Association, Center on Children and the Law, and other national organizations, celebrates the importance of and successful reunification of families involved with child welfare services. Though the national movement recognizes that reunification is achieved through collaboration among the family and the community, Hawai‘i’s event emphasized a “team effort” theme. A family, who had been involved with child welfare services but had since successfully reunified, was honored along with Māui Child Welfare Services and other team support members.

Hawai‘i’s inaugural event, held on the island of Māui, was graciously hosted by the Queen Lili‘uokalani Children’s Center. Special tribute was paid to Simon Ua and his family, Māui CRS worker Christine “Taty” Distal, and key support persons, including Lise Takihana, social worker at Wānapanapanapa Wānala, and the court, resource counselors, attorneys, the children’s GALs, and community service providers such as the family’s therapist, parent educator, and community shilo staff. The theme of this year’s event was “Reconnecting Hearts,” highlighting the DHS primary goal of successful reunification for families through a collaborative approach.

The event was attended by various dignitaries, including Senator Gilbert Kahele Aiona (Wāhikī, Wai‘anae, and Kahului) and Jo-Jill Roberto, Director of the Māui Department of Human Concerns, representing the office of the Māui Mayor Kale Kauai. Governor Neil Abercrombie also signed a proclamation that was presented to the Ua family and Ms. Distal/Māui CRS. The proclamation recognized National Reunification Month, underscoring the importance of reunification as the preferred outcome for families involved in child welfare services and emphasized the “team” approach to effective reunification.

At the event, the CRS emphasized its primary mission of reunification and strengthening families, and highlighted the importance of collaboration and partnerships when working with families. In a video featuring the Ua family and Ms. Distal, Simon shared his experience of being in the child welfare system for two years before being reunited with his wife and children. Simon discussed the challenges he faced during his time in the system and attributed the family’s success to the support of his CRS social worker and the social worker at the Wānapanapanapa Wānala facility, along with other support persons. Ms. Distal discussed how services provided, such as the children’s therapy, and the resource counselor were vital in ensuring the family’s success. This video can be found at www.epicmua.hawaii.gov/Reunification. By viewing the video, resource counselors can acquire 30 ongoing training credits. Call Family Programs Māui’s Wānapanapa Wānala at 808-875-5099 (Tel Free) or DHHS to schedule with any questions regarding the event.

The coordination of the event itself was a collaboration of various agencies and community organizations, including the DWP, the Judiciary, EPC Oahu, Inc., Partners in Development Foundation, Family Program Hawaiian Islands for Oahu, and the William S. Richardson School of Law. A big thank you also goes to the Queen Lili‘uokalani Children’s Center, Maui for hosting the event, donating lunch and providing all rental assistance for the day of the event, and to Māui High School and the law school for recruiting and adding the video to the Ua family and Ms. Distal, as well as the Māui Children’s Justice Center, the Māui Courier Center, Coast Sulution, Media Productions, Inc., and U-Save for their generous donations.

The State of Hawai‘i plans to continue the collaboration and hold annual National Reunification Month celebrations to honor families who were successfully reunified and their support team members.