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## Let's keep sustained focus on concerns of keiki, kupuna

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So much to do, so little time. It's tempting to think of the burden of lawmakers as a mission impossible because they grapple with societal problems that loom so large.

Drugs. Homelessness. Economic doldrums. An educational system struggling to bear up under mounting pressures. Medical costs and access. An aging population that will need more and more care.

Still, that's what we elect our leaders to do: Stand back, prioritize the problems and adopt various plans of attack to keep them manageable.

Trouble is, the attack hasn't been sustained enough on various fronts, especially on two key issues: healthcare, especially long-term care for our elderly, and early education for our keiki. We've seen little progress from the executive and legislative branches on these looming crises. That needs to change.

### **OUR ELDERLY**

Hawai'i, so long on the vanguard in healthcare services and access, has now fallen behind. According to the Hawai'i Uninsured Project, a study by the state's Hawai'i Health Care Task Force based on 2001 census figures, an estimated 120,000 people were uninsured, roughly 10 percent of the population. The problem is certainly worse by now. It's a stunning decline, considering that the uninsured rate in the 1980s hovered around 5 percent.

What makes this figure even more frightening is that the oldest of the baby boomer generation is now 62. With Hawai'i elders living longer than the national average, prospects for their long-term care are worrisome.

### **OUR YOUNG CHILDREN**

At the other end of the age spectrum is the hope of Hawai'i's future, the toddler and preschool generation. Early education is deemed essential to their academic and career success in later life. And yet last week, Isle educator Elizabeth Chun told a congressional panel that 40 percent of Hawai'i keiki live in families that can't afford early-education programs.

Chun's hope is that federal dollars can help the state with this. But it's mystifying why early education fell off the majority leadership's priority program for this session.

Granted, money is tight this session, and both of those issues are seen as high-ticket items.

But leadership is called for here, not the usual dithering. A lot of work has already been done by various legislative task forces and caucuses. It's time to act.

For instance, Senate Bill 2042 is an omnibus caregiving bill that could help families enable their seniors to "age in place" by lining up funding and pulling together various community resources. It deserves attention.

## **OUR ENERGY NEEDS**

There are bright spots in the legislative packages from majority and minority leadership as well as Gov. Linda Lingle's wish list. The brightest of these is the concurrence on the need to pursue greater energy independence.

That accord was driven, no doubt, by the high fuel costs that weigh down family budgets and impair the local and national economy. Various strategies deserve a look:

- Streamlining: The majority wants to streamline the permitting process for renewable energy projects by hiring a state facilitator. This notion meshes nicely with Lingle's idea of a renewable energy division to focus the state's efforts.
- Economic zones: Lawmakers rightly point out the need to give due attention to environmental protection and public review of the projects, but the minority leadership's ideas on "economic zones" for these developments could be incorporated, too.
- Biofuels: Both Lingle and the Democrats are pushing for law changes that would ease the use of agricultural lands for biofuels production. These ideas all need to be heard.

The taxpayers expect that on an issue with such potential impact on Hawai'i's economic sustainability, bipartisanship is key.

There's that word again: sustainability.

## **OUR SUSTAINABILITY**

Not to be lost in the government shuffle is the enactment of the Sustainability 2050 Plan, and the formation of the Sustainability Council. The members of this body will serve as the watchdogs to make sure our leaders stay on point in fulfilling the plan to protect our long-term future.

In fact, circling back to the Sustainability Plan now and then during the session and using it as a barometer would be a good way to ensure we're all staying on the right track.

After all, the Legislature must use public funds judiciously, giving attention to wheels that may not be squeaking so loudly as well as the ones that do.

That's their mission. And while it may be difficult, it's not impossible.

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