



**Testimony of Jesse K. Souki**

**President, Hawai'i State Bar Association**

**Before the Hawai'i State Commission on Salaries**

**Date: November 22, 2024**

**Time: 9:00 a.m.**

**Subject: Support for Salary Increases for the Attorney General, Judges, and Justices**

Aloha Chairperson Hanabusa, Vice Chairperson Machida, and Members of the Commission:

My name is Jesse K. Souki, and I am the President of the Hawai'i State Bar Association (HSBA). Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in strong support of salary increases for the Attorney General, judges, and justices of the State of Hawai'i.

I would like to note that this testimony specifically addresses Agenda Items IV.A., which relates to salary adjustments for the Attorney General and members of the judiciary. These decisions are critical for ensuring fair compensation for those entrusted with safeguarding justice and the rule of law in our state.

Before I proceed, I want to clarify that the decisions the Commission is considering regarding salaries do not include my current place of employment or position. My testimony today is solely in my capacity as President of the HSBA and as an advocate for Hawai'i's legal community.

The HSBA represents over 8,000 attorneys licensed in Hawai'i. Our mission is to unite and inspire Hawai'i's lawyers to promote justice, uphold the rule of law, and improve the quality of legal services. Ensuring adequate compensation for Hawai'i's top legal officers and members of the judiciary is essential to achieving this mission.

I did not get an opportunity to review the board packet, which is not available online. So please forgive me if my testimony is duplicative or off-point. I will briefly discuss five issues for your consideration: Attracting and Retaining Talent, Maintaining Public Confidence and Judicial Independence, Addressing the Cost of Living and Inflation, Recognizing Increased Legal Complexity, and Aligning with Federal Benchmarks.

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First, competitive salaries are crucial to attracting and retaining highly qualified legal professionals for public service. The Attorney General, judges, and justices shoulder significant responsibilities, including providing legal counsel to the state, upholding the rule of law, and safeguarding constitutional rights.

- According to judicial salary data as of 2024, general jurisdiction judges in Illinois earn \$234,380, the highest in the nation. In Michigan, general jurisdiction judges earn \$172,134 annually, while Supreme Court justices earn \$181,483.

- Attorney General salaries also vary widely. In Utah, the Attorney General earns \$173,755, while in New York, the Attorney General earns \$247,819.

Hawai'i's judicial salaries are generally lower than those of comparable jurisdictions. Adjustments would help Hawai'i remain competitive in attracting and keeping the best legal talent for these critical roles.

Second, an adequately compensated judiciary is essential to maintaining public confidence in Hawai'i's legal system. Judges and justices must be free from external pressures, including financial concerns, to preserve judicial independence.

- A stable, well-compensated judiciary ensures impartial decision-making and reinforces public trust in the rule of law.

Third, Hawai'i has one of the highest costs of living in the United States, driven largely by housing and transportation costs, according to the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center (MERIC) Cost of Living Index. I am sure this is consistent with Dr. Tian's data and research.

- Without periodic adjustments, the real value of judicial and executive salaries erodes. This financial strain discourages highly qualified candidates from pursuing or remaining in public service.

Fourth, the cases Hawai'i's judiciary handles have grown increasingly complex, requiring expertise in diverse areas such as land use, environmental law, and Native Hawaiian rights. These demands underscore the need to attract top legal minds to public service.

Five, Federal attorneys, such as Assistant U.S. Attorneys, can earn up to \$191,800 annually when locality pay is included. Aligning Hawai'i's judiciary and Attorney General salaries with these federal benchmarks would ensure fairness and competitiveness.

In conclusion, the mission of the HSBA includes promoting justice and improving the quality of legal services. Salary increases for the Attorney General, judges, and justices are essential to achieving these goals. Adequate compensation ensures that Hawai'i's legal system remains staffed by highly qualified and dedicated professionals who uphold the rule of law and serve the public with distinction.

Mahalo for your consideration of this critical issue and thank you for stepping forward to serve on this Commission.

Sincerely,

Jesse K. Souki  
President, Hawai'i State Bar Association