

First Hawaii Conference on Language Access
East West Center – Hawaii Imin International Conference Center
March 28, 2008 Welcome Address
Darwin L.D. Ching (5-8 minutes)

- Aloha and Welcome! On behalf of Governor Linda Lingle and the State of Hawaii, I welcome all of you to our State's First Hawaii Conference on Language Access.
- I would like to begin by recognizing the Office of Language Access and its Executive Director, Serafin "Jun" Colmenares for their hard work in organizing this conference.
- I commend the OLA, HMSA Foundation, University of Hawaii Center for Interpretation and Translation Studies, and the Office of Student Equity, Excellence and Diversity, for their vision, support, and efforts in holding this event.
- I would also like to especially thank our keynote speaker, Ms. Grace Chung Becker, Assistant Attorney General, Civil Rights Division, of the U.S. Department of Justice, for taking time out of her very busy schedule to be with us today.
- I also extend a big "Mahalo" to our other out-of-state speakers for joining us today—
 - **Ms. Susan Shah**, Senior Planner, Center of Immigration and Justice, Vera Institute of Justice, New York, New York.
 - **Ms. Robin Bronen**, Executive Director, Alaska Immigration Justice Project/Language Interpreter Center, Anchorage, Alaska.
 - **Ms. Aryan Rodriguez**, Language Access Program Director, Washington D.C. Office of Human Rights.
 - **Ms. Jean Bruggeman**, Director, Community Legal Interpreter bank, Ayuda, Washington D.C.

We look forward to hearing and learning from each of you.

- My warm greetings also go to the other conferees from the neighbor islands as well as those from Oahu – thank you for coming to this very important conference.
- As I look around the room today, I see the many diverse faces that are reflective of Hawaii's unique culture. As sons and daughters of immigrants, it is our obligation to ensure that we welcome and help other immigrants who arrive on our shores.
- We are a melting pot of various nationalities and cultures. Diversity defines us, and we honor and respect that diversity through programs such as Hawaii's Language Access Law.
- Today, 26 percent of Hawaii's population speaks a language other than English. 144-thousand of Hawaii's 1.2 million residents are unable to speak English "very well".
- These immigrants have a limited ability to read, write, speak or understand English.
- Their inability to speak or understand English is often a barrier to important government benefits and services for which they qualify -- such as applying and obtaining:
 - Health benefits and services,
 - Social service programs,
 - Job training and employment assistance programs, and
 - Being afforded fair and impartial hearings.
- Hawaii's Language Access Law and this conference are meant to remove this barrier. Language should no longer be a hindrance to obtaining essential government services.
- If there is one thing that we must convey as public officials it is that Government's ultimate responsibility is to help those who are not capable of helping themselves.
- Nowhere is this diversity more pronounced than in the area of language. For many in our state, English is not their primary

language. Many have only a limited ability to read, write, speak or understand English.

- Language barriers often prohibit our residents from fully participating in our community and undermine efforts to becoming self-sufficient and productive.
- There should be equal access to basic services, programs and activities, regardless of the language spoken, to increase accessibility to state government.
- One such instance that we experienced in Hawaii is the experience suffered by a woman with limited English proficiency who was a victim of domestic violence.
- When the police arrived at the scene, her English-speaking abuser told the police that she was suicidal and that she was the one causing harm to herself.
- Subsequently, the woman was involuntarily committed to the State Hospital and her child was taken into Child Protective Services, all without provision of an interpreter.
- It was only days later that the staff of the hospital called in an interpreter after noticing that the woman did not appear suicidal. She was then released. This nightmare situation illustrates the need for language access services and for government entities to start addressing the needs of the "silent minority".
- It was in recognition of our obligations to this population that Governor Lingle signed Hawaii's language access bill into law on July 10, 2006. This law required all agencies, public and private, that receive State Funds and provide services to the public to develop and implement plans to address the needs of our population that do not speak English proficiently.
- The law also created the Office of Language Access (OLA), an attached agency within the Department of Labor and Industrial

Relations, to assist those agencies in designing and implementing their plans.

- Some have questioned how serious this administration is about language access. To those who question our commitment, I would point to our Governor and her recent State-of-the-State address which was translated into six languages: Hawaiian, Chinese, Ilokano, Japanese, Korean, and Tagalog.
- This may very well have been the first time in the history of any State in the Nation that a State-of-the-State Address of a sitting Governor was translated into six languages simultaneously.
- It is with satisfaction to note, that within eleven months of its existence, the OLA has taken small but important steps in ensuring that state agencies and covered entities comply with the law, as well as promote the rights of our limited English proficient population.
- On a point of personal pride, I would like to note that the Department of Labor and Industrial Relations was the very first executive department to develop its own language access plan – even before Hawaii’s language access law was passed.
- Is our plan perfect? No. But it aspires to be. I urge all of you here today to look at what we have done so far in promoting this law and our attempts to ensure language access.
- While we recognize that our plan still needs to be improved, I am happy to note that the department is providing the lead among state agencies in the collection of data on Limited English Proficient, or LEP clients, and has designed an electronic system for them to register for language services.
- This was done because we believe in increasing public access to state information. I trust this will give a strong message to all state agencies that this administration is serious in promoting language access, and hope that they will follow suit.
- We understand that this task – ensuring language access for all – is a challenging one. It will take a lot of time, resources, and effort to

achieve this goal. More important, it will take all of us, working together, to reach this objective.

- The theme of this conference – Laulima: Working Together to Promote Language Access in Hawaii – says it all.
- Government, the private sector, and the community – we are all "paddlers on the same canoe", and only through teamwork and paddling together can we reach our common destination.
- Once again, welcome and Mahalo Nui Loa.