April 21, 2020

The Honorable David Y. Ige
Governor, State of Hawaii
Executive Chambers, State Capitol
Honolulu, HI 96813

Dear Governor Ige:

We are shocked and appalled that your first choice for balancing the State budget is on the backs of your dedicated, loyal and hardworking workforce.

It makes us wonder if you know and understand what we do, how underpaid we are, how costly our health insurance is and the type of conditions we work under? Not to mention the antiquated technology and the mind-numbing procurement processes that we have to adhere to just to get our jobs done.

We have had to fight you and your administration to get decent pay raises for salaries that lag far behind our peers both in the private sector and on the mainland. Now, even those are in jeopardy and the initial response was to slash our pay by 20%? Yesterday you did acknowledge salary reductions would be a last resort however our members are still very fearful and unsure of what will happen next.

Much of your workforce is woefully unpaid and already barely scraping by financially. Thousands of your employees are people who are addressed in the ALICE report, living on the edge of financial catastrophe. Yet your initial plan would have created more homelessness, reduced resources for victims of domestic violence and created more anxiety in an already stressful situation.

But many of us still love our jobs and we are committed to our communities and the people we help every day. As the employer and leader of our state, you should be an advocate for your workers and stop treating them as numbers in your budget. People are already on edge and now they are desperate and even suicidal. Please see attached for a few testimonials from your dedicated, hardworking employees who shared how a 20% pay cut would drastically impact them and their families.

Not only does a pay cut hurt public workers personally, if they have less money to spend it can put our economy into a death spiral. The answer to this pandemic crisis is not to put more people on the unemployment lists or take away what little money they have that they could spend on supporting local businesses like takeout restaurants and local farmers — who need help more than ever. Paradox of thrift is basic economics. If people’s salaries are cut, they tighten their budgets and spend less, which further exacerbates a recession.
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The poor working conditions issue holds true for many State departments. Hawaii is 20 to 30 years behind in upgrades to technology and tools that would help government employees work more efficiently. But still, we carry on, we persevere, we get the job done. However, as usual, instead of investing in your best resource — your people — the administration wants austerity measures.

Your workers aren’t idle. Those who cannot telework during this pandemic and are forced to stay home for public health reasons are doing so because that is what the leaders of this state are telling them to do — to stop death and sickness. To stop our healthcare system from being overwhelmed, to stop our friends, family and kupuna from dying or suffering terrible illness. Those so-called idle workers want to work. They want to help. But now they are the scapegoats for those who want to cut their jobs and call them “bloat” and “idle.” Why won’t you stand up for them?

These are people, your people, your neighbors, relatives and friends. Government workers always are asked to make sacrifices. And we always take it. But no more. We have been and continue to work without adequate personal protective equipment (PPE). Many of us are literally risking our lives doing our jobs for you and the State. Requests for Temporary Hazard Pay have been denied. We have been quiet. We have been cooperative. We have gone through proper channels, but you and your administration have not listened. We will not be quiet anymore. There is too much at stake.

This is not a selfish request. We are asking you to be a good employer, fund your workforce, fund the countless services that the public needs and demands. $1.2 billion in federal stimulus aid is here and more is likely on the way. Executive Director Randy Perreira previously sent letters outlining areas where funds are available in the budget and in loans from the Federal Reserve. UHERO economists agree that slashing government is not the way to go. Please do what it takes to keep your government services and public workforce intact. Show us the way forward to reopening our State in a phased approach that balances health and safety and the economy. It takes courage and bold action. Decide what kind of Hawaii you want and make it happen. You are the leader of our state and we are counting on you.

Sincerely,

Jon Gasper  
President, HGEA State Board of Directors  
and the HGEA State Board Directors

Attachment
Following is just a small sample of comments from HGEA members — your employees — who shared their personal stories with us.

"Governor Ige's proposed 20% pay reduction for state employees would have profound effects on myself, colleagues, local economy and the government (locally and federally). Historically speaking, the job I'm in as a Behavioral Health Specialist (BHS) SR22 position in 2008 around a similar step level (Step F) would have received approximately $51,312 per year. A 20% cut in 2020 would put folks like myself around $47,040 per year, which is well below the 2008 yearly salary. The idea of a pay reduction is utterly absurd for multiple reasons. Let us not forget a BHS position requires a master's degree in a mental health field with many years of education and practicum experience prior to obtaining the job. This degree is not free nor cheap and individuals such as myself are still paying for this schooling. A 20% pay cut would deplete any possibility at paying my student loans, putting food on my table, affording my monthly car note, and most importantly the overpriced housing that all of us face here in Hawaii. I am asking Governor Ige and his constituents to heavily reconsider any reductions in pay for those of us working hard to improve the lives of our keiki at the Department of Education before it is too late. Simply stated, the local economy will collapse if we can't afford basic living essentials.” (Unit 13, Jason Wisdom)

: Aloha,

"I am a single parent and I have worked two jobs for nearly 15 years trying to survive in Hawaii. I quit my part-time job in December 2019 because working two jobs for nearly 15 years has put a toll on my body. I am currently working one job and barely making ends meet. My 20% cut for two years will affect me and my loved ones. This cut will cause me to struggle even more and definitely fall behind on all my bills and maybe even lose my home and become homeless. Mahalo. (Unit 13, Keiki Kipapa)

"My husband passed away 5 years ago. His funeral set me back $5,000 which I had to take out from our emergency savings. I have only begun to replenish that savings. After his death, I stayed at our house in Ainaloa in the Punalu'u district for about two years until it was impossible for me to keep up with repairs on the house and taking care of the yard. I made the difficult decision to leave my house of 25 years and move into Hilo to be closer to my job. I found a nice house about a 5 minute drive from my job. In March of this year, my rent went up by $70. It's still manageable but if my pay gets cut by 20%, I may find myself without housing. I also have a car payment, electric, water, and other things that I have to pay for. This is all coming out of one income. Governor Ige has no idea how much hardship it is for a person to live on one income and still manage to gets bills paid. Now with this, I'm trying hard to shop only for things that I need. I'm afraid that if my pay is cut by 20%, I won't be able to survive for two years. He really has to look for other options because the people of Hawaii are hurting and he'll only hurt them more if this is done. He also has to realize that the people who will get their pay cut, are the same people who voted him into office. Not Pono at all. That is my manao.” (Unit 3 Madeline Sehna)