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Bringing a child into this world carries huge responsibilities, requiring an investment of time, money and emotion that is impossible to quantify. When mothers and fathers utterly fail in this obligation — abusing, neglecting or abandoning their offspring — the unfortunate keiki become wards of the state, with taxpayers helping to shoulder the cost of raising them.

In Hawaii, this fiscal responsibility persists until the child turns 21 — or 26, if he or she is going to college — and applies whether the youngster is living with an unrelated foster family, a grandparent or other blood relative who has been licensed as a foster parent, or with a newly adoptive family.

That much is not in dispute. What is in dispute is the proper amount of the basic monthly stipend, known as the "foster board rate," issued to the caregivers who welcome these needy children into their homes.

Advocates for foster families have lobbied the Department of Human Services and the state Legislature for years to increase the \$529 monthly payment, which has not risen since 1990. The DOH has rebuffed past attempts, arguing that raising the foster care rate would mandate similar increases in the monthly stipend paid to families who adopt foster children and to those who house them while they go to college. DHS was loath to divert money from other equally important programs, and administrators emphasized that the basic stipend paid to foster parents is only one form of aid they receive, augmented by clothing allowances, child-care subsidies, mileage reimbursements and other cash aid, including an additional \$570 a month for children deemed difficult to care for.

That is all true, but 23 years without an adjustment in the basic rate makes an increase overdue.

Now the Hawaii Appleseed Center has forced the issue, filing a class-action lawsuit against DHS in federal court on behalf of a sole foster mother representing a class of about 1,000 foster families in Hawaii. The lawsuit claims the state is violating the U.S. Child Welfare Act, which in exchange for providing federal funding to supplement states' foster care programs requires those states to pay foster parents a "maintenance payment" that covers nearly all a foster child's needs.

Hawaii takes the federal funding, but provides a grossly inadequate monthly stipend, the lawsuit contends, claiming that the monthly payment would have risen to about \$950 by now had it been adjusted for inflation. A law firm that won a similar case on behalf of California foster families is assisting in this case.

After the lawsuit was filed Tuesday, DHS Director Patricia McManaman released a statement saying that the department had been working since this summer with foster parents and children, nonprofits and members of the community to draft a recommendation for the 2014 Hawaii Legislature that would increase payments for foster families, based upon national standards and best practices.

We hope that recommendation includes a streamlined system that takes into account the various financial resources available to foster parents and disperses a higher lump-sum as part of the basic rate.

We also hope that the DHS' willingness to address this issue portends a quick settlement of the class-action lawsuit, one that is fair to the foster children, the families who care for them on a daily basis and the taxpayers who help pay for it.

Parenting is never strictly a dollars-and-cents proposition. It's unreasonable to demand that taxpayers pay every penny of the cost of foster care, but equally wrong to argue that foster parents deserve no raise at all. The appropriate settlement will find the middle ground.

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