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DOE gets deadline to track homeless

By Alexandre Da Silva
adasilva@starbulletin.com

A federal judge has given the state Department of Education until April 30 to revise its enrollment forms and computer registration programs to improve how it identifies, tracks and transports homeless students as required under federal law.

U.S. District Judge Helen Gillmor, in an order filed last week, also is requiring Education Department employees in the enrollment section to use a questionnaire to ensure homeless applicants are identified and told about their rights.

The 17-page document instructs education officials to come up with a plan by March 15 to implement the changes.

Schools Assistant Superintendent Daniel Hamada said the Education Department will comply with the order. "We want to make it better," he said.

The Feb. 19 order comes about a week after Gillmor sided with three homeless families who sued the state for allegedly failing to provide them an adequate education under the federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act of 1987.

The act, which gives Hawaii about \$200,000 a year in federal grants for homeless programs, mandates schools to offer transportation for homeless students and allows children whose families are displaced by homelessness to enroll in the campus they were attending before, even if they move outside the district.

Olive Kaleuati, one of the plaintiffs in the class-action suit, has said she was forced to pull her two sons from Leihoku Elementary after moving to a shelter by Kamaile Elementary in Waianae. Kaleuati said she was not aware she could have kept her sons at Leihoku, and education officials acknowledged in court they do not ask families if they are homeless to avoid "stigmatizing" children.

But in expecting families to voluntarily tell schools they are homeless, the Education Department is essentially "ignoring" them, said Lawyers for Equal Justice attorney William Durham, who filed the suit with the American Civil Liberties Union.

"You have to at least ask them if you are going to identify them," he said yesterday. "As these families are identified, the department will no longer be able to routinely deny homeless children these services by claiming that they are ignorant as to their whereabouts."

In calling for improvements, Gillmor noted the Education Department could only account for 300 of more than 2,000 children estimated to be homeless in the 2007-08 school year.

She said better computer software is needed to check whether students identified as homeless at the end of a semester who remain without a home when classes resume continue to get assistance. Education officials

might also have to revise administrative rules "to remove barriers" preventing students from attending the school they originally enrolled in before becoming homeless.

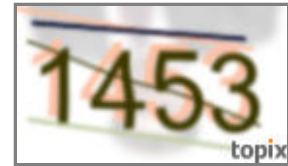
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