

*Dear Reader,*

*This article about ‘Ohana Conferencing was published in October 2008 in the CASA Judges’ Page Newsletter, a nationwide newsletter for Family Court judges. Since its publication an additional 5,000 ‘Ohana Conferences (OC) have been completed for a total of 13,000 since EPIC’s inception.*

*We’ve all heard the saying “It takes a village to raise a child.” OC’s can be a powerful tool to draw on a child’s existing village and build family support. For resource caregivers, OC’s can provide the safety and structure to meet with family members and find collaborative ways to enhance the well-being of the children in their care. In every OC all participants are respected and everyone’s contribution is valued. If you would like to initiate or attend an OC, please contact your DHS social worker and discuss this option.*

*Mahalo and aloha,  
Wilma*

## **‘Ohana Conferences: A Collaborative Approach to Meeting the Needs of Abused and Neglected Children**

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**Summary** ‘Ohana Conferencing is a powerful community-based intervention strategy to divert child abuse and neglect cases from court and assist families involved in the court process.

In 1989, a legal shock wave reverberated throughout human service departments and local communities in the Polynesian world. A new law, the New Zealand Children and Young Persons and Their Family Act, went into effect. The act fundamentally shifted how government went about protecting children from abuse and neglect. At the heart of the change were the engagement and empowerment of immediate and extended family to respond to the needs of their own kin through a process called the family group conference.

Family group conferences are single or serial meetings that highlight family strengths and draw upon the family’s wisdom and bonds. Social workers stress the standard of care; the family develops the solution to meet that standard. Personal and community support resources are shared, but the family is given private time to discuss the situation, take ownership of the problem and devise a course of action. Once the group is reconvened, the family, social worker and other service providers agree to, or build on, the family’s plan to meet the child’s need for safety and security.

The act’s shock wave fully hit the shores of the US in 1996 when the ‘Ohana Conferencing Project began in Honolulu, Hawaii. Begun as a collaborative effort by the Family Court of the First Circuit, the Department of Human Services—Social Services Division, and the Wai’anāe community on the island of O’ahu, the project was one of four nationwide family group conferencing pilots funded by the Edna McConnell Clark Foundation with support from the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges. The project developed a model for Hawaii that soon became a powerful community-based intervention strategy to divert child abuse and neglect cases from court and assist families involved in the court process.

In 1998, EPIC, Inc., a nonprofit 501(c)(3) Hawaii corporation was formed to provide ‘Ohana Conferencing throughout the state. “‘Ohana” means family in Hawaiian, and like its New Zealand counterpart, an ‘Ohana Conference pulls on existing family ties to “build and strengthen the network of protection of the extended family and the community for the child.” (Hawaii Revised Statutes Sec. 587-2) Participation is inclusive of any family or community member who may be able to assist in addressing the child’s safety and risk factors or transition planning. All requests by an active case participant for an ‘Ohana Conference are honored. The result is a culturally relevant, community-consistent response for children brought into the child welfare services (CWS) system.

Respect for all participants and an emphasis on the needs of the children are at the heart of 'Ohana Conferences. This was true in the recent case of Helen (not her real name), a young mother whose three children were deemed at risk because of Helen's drug use.

Helen's mom, the primary caregiver of the children, died in the spring of 2008 and Helen was overwhelmed with grief and the responsibility of single parenthood. CPS became involved after receiving a report of neglect, and an 'Ohana Conference was requested to explore options for the children and their mother.

The children's father was in prison and did not want his family involved, but the extended maternal family stepped up to the plate. Two aunts, three uncles, four cousins, along with Helen, her social worker, two child welfare services observers and an EPIC facilitator and recorder were present at the 'Ohana Conference. Family strengths were identified; service options clarified and legal repercussions were explained. Helen and her family felt the social worker was rooting for them; the social worker saw the resourcefulness and love that existed in Helen's family. An uncle and aunt agreed to take all three children into their home while other family members agreed to supply respite services. Helen, the aunts and uncles cooperated to arrange medical and dental care for the children. Counseling services to help the children and Helen deal with their grief were recommended and accepted. The family, in a supportive tone, expressed their wish for Helen to follow through on substance abuse treatment services so she could be reunited with her children. In the end, a service plan was drawn up that included such treatment. Everyone, including Helen, signed it. To date, Helen and her children are doing very well and reunification is now a viable option.

Since its inception, EPIC has conducted over 8,000 conferences, which have served more than 80,000 participants. In *A Cohort Study of 'Ohana Conferencing in Child Abuse and Neglect (American Humane Association Journal, Vol. 19, number 4, 2005, pg. 36)*, which compared conferenced and non-conferenced CWS cases, 'Ohana Conferences resulted in cases of shorter duration with fewer court hearings, fewer foster home and shelter placements, and fewer ending in permanent custody (a status similar to that resulting from the termination of parental rights). Satisfaction with the CWS system was also rated higher when conferences were utilized. What was once an often tense relationship between the state and families has turned into one of deeper collaboration due to a concerted effort to use 'Ohana Conferences. The result is children in foster care are less displaced, which, in turn, strengthens their sense of identity, security and long-term stability. Lead Juvenile Division Judge Bode Uale, observed: "The value of 'Ohana Conferencing is immeasurable. It is the act of getting an extended family together to ask for help for family members and their children who are going to be forever affected by their involvement in the child welfare system. It is reaching for family support when it is most needed. It is giving the opportunity for family to surround their family members and to extend their love by caring for relative children who would otherwise be placed with strangers. It is also giving family members a voice to offer solutions to resolve problems of their own family members. 'Ohana Conferencing takes advantage of family strengths to help their own."

### ***Honolulu Model Court***

The Honolulu Model Court at the Family Court of the First Circuit, Hawaii, has been a part of the Victim's Act Model Courts Project in the Permanency Planning for Children Department (PPCD) of the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges (NCJFCJ) since November 1997. The Hon. Bode Uale is the current lead judge.