

Hawaii

# OHA Gets An F Grade For Telling You How It Spends Your Money

The Native Hawaiian agency claims it's becoming more open all the time, but a national study says otherwise.

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By Chad Blair    / May 10, 2017

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A new report identifies 42 government agencies across the country that have poor practices when it comes to online spending transparency.

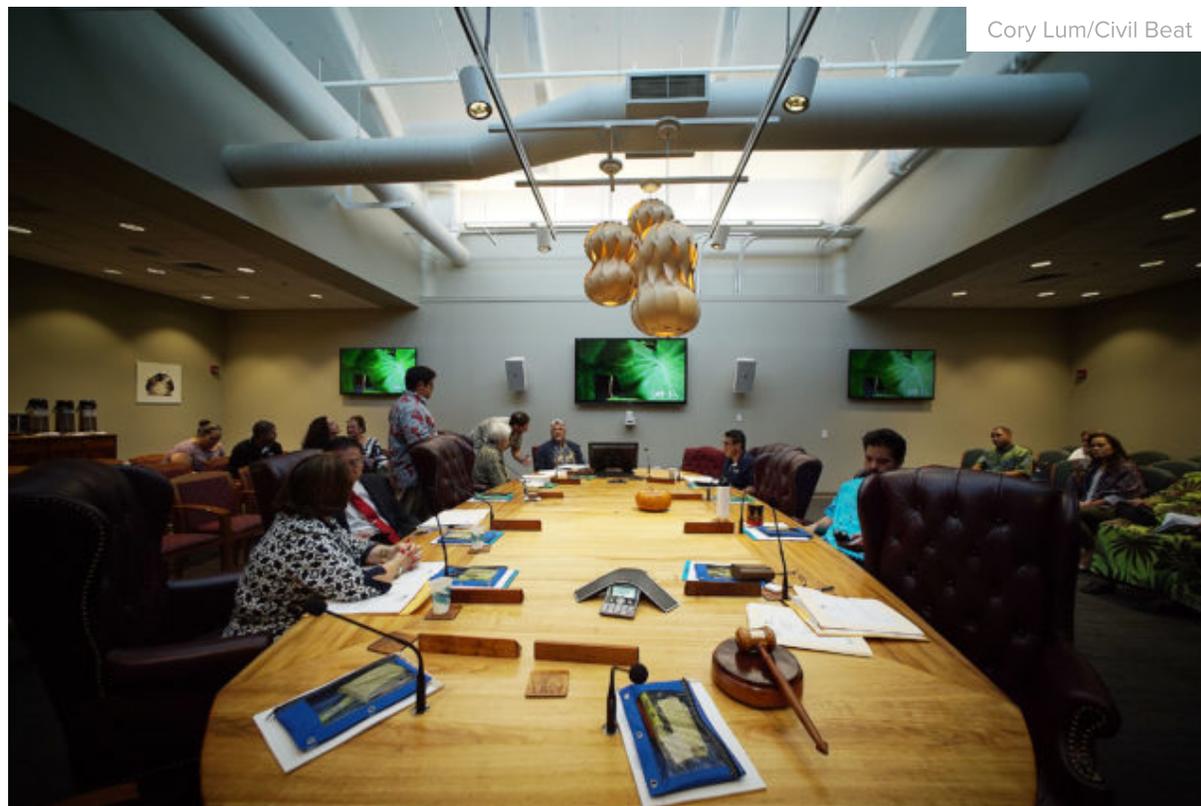
One of them is the [Office of Hawaiian Affairs](#), the only city, county or state agency named from Hawaii.

The U.S. PIRG Education Fund's report, titled [Following the Money 2017: Governing in the Shadows](#), was released last month.

The federation of state Public Interest Research Groups [describes itself](#) as “a consumer group that stands up to powerful interests whenever they threaten

our health and safety, our financial security, or our right to fully participate in our democratic society.”

The report gives OHA, which had expenditures of \$55 million in 2013, a grade of F.



An Office of Hawaiian Affairs Board of Trustees meeting in January. The meetings are live-streamed, which OHA cites as an example of transparency.

U.S. PIRG gave OHA scores of zero when it comes to online searches for checkbook-spending level information, data that can be downloaded in bulk and the ability to search for keywords, recipients and excluded information.

Only nine other agencies, which U.S. PIRG calls “special purpose districts,” were considered worse than OHA. They include the Sacramento Area Flood Control Agency in California, the King County Rural Library District in Washington state and the Nebraska Public Power District.

“Citizens’ ability to understand how their tax dollars are spent is fundamental to democracy,” the report’s executive summary states. “Budget and spending transparency holds government officials accountable for making

smart decisions, checks corruption, and provides citizens an opportunity to affect how government dollars are spent.”

## OHA CEO: Transparency A ‘Top Priority’

Nationwide, there are more than 38,000 special districts that spend more than \$200 billion annually.

PIRG evaluated 79 agencies in all. Those topping the list with “A” grades include the Port of Houston Authority in Texas, the Chicago Transit Authority and the Louisville-Jefferson County Metropolitan Sewer District.

“The nation’s most transparent special districts are often those in states that have taken action to require or encourage the posting of financial information online,” the report states.

Asked to comment on the report, OHA CEO Kamana‘opono Crabbe said, “Transparency and accountability continue to be top priorities for the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. To this end, we are committed to going above and beyond just complying with minimum open government requirements, such as the state sunshine law.”

As examples, Crabbe said OHA’s monthly report on all board actions and votes is included in its newspaper, [Ka Wai Ola](#), which is distributed to more than 60,000 subscribers in Hawaii and on the mainland.

OHA has also live-streamed Board of Trustee standing committee meetings since 2013. And,



OHA Trustee Keli Akina has pushed for a detailed audit of the agency.

OHA posts online [meeting agendas](#) and minutes, [annual reports](#), [financial statements](#) and procurement and [awards information](#).

At least one OHA trustee thinks OHA can do better.

“While OHA serves the special purpose of bettering the conditions of the Hawaiian people, it is a state government agency which must be transparent and accountable to the public,” said Trustee Kelii Akina. “In my personal opinion, OHA can improve its online financial transparency by simply creating a website page that provides detailed information on OHA’s revenues, spending, fiscal policies and priorities, and also allows the public to respond with constructive feedback.”



Cory Lum/Civil Beat

Akina, who was elected to the board in November, has led efforts to scrutinize OHA’s operations through auditing. He supported the majority of trustees [who briefly installed](#) Trustee Rowena Akana as board chairwoman.

OHA CEO Kamana’opono Crabbe says the agency is making strides when it comes to financial transparency.

Akana has [long criticized how the agency is run](#), and she tried to have Crabbe fired. Just this week, [Hawaii News Now reported](#) that the state attorney general is investigating whether OHA improperly awarded a lucrative contract without competitive bidding. The report quotes Akana as saying the improper awarding of OHA contracts is rampant.

Crabbe said efforts at greater financial transparency are already underway.

In March, OHA added [a page on its website](#) about its upcoming biennium budget, one that allows for community input. More information on contracts and personnel will be posted beginning in October, he said.

“While transparency and accountability are agency priorities, we also recognize that there will always be room for improvement,” said Crabbe. “In the end, we welcome opportunities to share with our beneficiaries and the public how OHA is managing its trust to meet our legal mandate of bettering the lives of Native Hawaiians.”

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