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Hawaii News

Youth legislature to take up mock measures

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Hawaii State Legislators, YMCA officials and community leaders joined with the 76 student delegates and their families and friends in the opening ceremony of the 66th Annual YMCA Youth in Government legislative session in the State Senate Chamber of the State Capitol, Wednesday, December 26, 2016. The session included the swearing-in of the Youth Governor, Mary Alice Shaw, Damien Memorial School senior, Youth Senate President, Lena Mochizuki, Kalani High School senior and Youth House Speaker, Tevita Hifo, Punahou junior, and a group photo of the Youth Legislature and organizers.

Case McKinley, a senior at Waialua High School, hopes to accomplish this week something that members of the state Legislature have failed to do: pass a bill that

automatically registers residents to vote when they apply or renew a drivers license.

McKinley, who will attend Harvard University next fall, said that such a bill would be particularly helpful in getting out the youth vote.

"If we can make the process seamless, maybe we can encourage our weakest voting bloc to get to the polls more often," he said.

McKinley is one of dozens of middle and high school students across Oahu who are introducing and debating bills this week as part of the YMCA's 66th annual mock legislative session. If his bill "passes," it will be among the measures sent to Gov. David Ige and other state officials.

"This is a great way not only to teach young people how the government works, but also to teach government what its youngest citizens want," McKinley told the Honolulu Star-Advertiser from the floor of the Senate chamber at the state Capitol on Wednesday following opening ceremonies.

THE students will spend the next few days at Camp Erdman in Waialua, where they will debate about 30 bills they have written and introduced, ultimately passing or rejecting them. The successful measures will be sent to their elected governor, Alice Shaw, a senior at Damien Memorial School, for decision-making.

Shaw, who will sign or veto the bills on Friday, beat out five other candidates for youth governor.

"My strategy was to appeal to passion, I guess," Shaw said of her campaign victory, adding that she also worked to build "bonds and relationships" with other program participants in order to earn their trust.

Some of this year's mock legislative proposals include requiring SNAP benefits, formerly known as food stamps, to be accepted at farmers markets; permitting homeless people to obtain free state identification cards; and legalizing recreational marijuana use.

Another bill would raise the drinking age to 25, saying that "the rational part of a teen's brain isn't fully developed" until then.

"Adults think with the prefrontal cortex, the brain's rational part," according to the bill.

STUDENTS have also drafted bills that address education reform. One measure would automatically give teachers a \$4,000 raise in hopes of reducing turnover, while another would create a required course on social justice and injustice, citing "a lack of education on discrimination, inequality and racism."

The long-standing Youth and Government program is a way to engage students in public policy debates, teach them about local government and boost confidence,

according to YMCA officials.

“Throughout that process, they really walk away with a lot of self-confidence,” said Cassidy Inamasu, YMCA state director of Youth and Government. “And so I think with those two things combined — learning about how the government works, with also this new-found confidence — they are able to navigate and find pathways for their future so that they can then be able to actually impact the community that surrounds us.”

One high school senior from Waianae, who didn’t want her name used, said that the YMCA’s programs have helped her to quit alcohol and marijuana. This year, she is participating in the Youth and Government program as a member of the press corps, which will cover the mock legislative session in a newsletter.

The program “has meant a lot to me due to the fact that it helped me with my self-esteem, as well as my self-confidence and my ability for public speaking,” she said.

The real legislative session will get underway on Jan. 18.

Sen. Karl Rhoads said that he is still hoping that his automatic voter registration proposal, which failed in last year’s legislative session, will one day pass.

“I think it is important because I believe in democracy and everyone that is eligible to vote should vote,” said Rhoads. “For democracy to function in the long run, you need everyone involved.”

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