

# Kailua

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**HUGS** for Hawai'i's  
Seriously Ill *Children* and Their *Families*

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# HUGS for Hawai'i's Seriously Ill Children and Their Families

BY ERICA YAMAUCHI  
PHOTOS PROVIDED BY HUGS

**H**UGS (Help, Understanding and Group Support) received its name from a local family who was receiving support from the organization while their child was battling cancer. The family said they came up with the name because when you are dealing with a child's serious illness, sometimes all you can do to support a family is to give them a hug and let them know about the support that HUGS uniquely provides.

The organization now known as HUGS for Hawai'i's Seriously Ill Children and Their Families was founded in 1982 by a small group of volunteers who recognized the many challenges and stressors that families with seriously ill children face.

"They noticed families were being constantly tested and challenged in every way – financially, spiritually, emotionally, and by many other issues related to their child's condition," said Alex Wereszczynskyj, HUGS' development director. "They didn't want families to go through this journey alone, and envisioned an organization that would provide both support and compassion to these families."

Initially, it was informally known as the "Center," and then was renamed the Young People's Support Center. Later, it became officially known as HUGS – Help, Understanding & Group Support for Hawai'i's Seriously Ill Children and Their Families in 1989.





This month, the organization will host its first-ever virtual 5K challenge. From July 3 through July 11, get movin' with HUGS! Register to participate in the event here: <https://www.hugshawaii.org/>.

"You can run, walk, swim or Zumba 5K to participate, and you can also take it a step further by becoming a fundraiser or creating a team. There will be prizes and all paid registrants will receive an official "Get Movin' for HUGS" Finisher T-shirt at the end of the event!" added Alex.

Proceeds from the virtual event will benefit HUGS to help support Hawai'i families with a seriously ill child. We encourage you to keep track of your steps or miles completed, and post photos along your 5K journey. Be sure to tag @hugshawaii on Facebook and Instagram, and use the official event hashtag: #GetMovinforHUGS.

HUGS mission is to strengthen Hawai'i's families and improve their quality of life as they face the emotional and financial hardships of caring for a seriously ill child. The organization supports families on all islands with a child up to age 21 who has been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness or disease, and provides comprehensive, long-term support to each member of the family to ensure they don't have to face their challenges alone.

"Our motto is in our name. We stand by it – Help, Understanding and Group Support," said Joan Naguwa, HUGS' executive director. "HUGS provides individualized support to each member of the family throughout the child's medical journey, whether it be a sibling or a single mom."

Over the years, HUGS has grown to meet the emotional and financial needs of thousands of families from across the islands, helping them cope with the effects of life-threatening childhood illness. At any time, the organization is assisting more than 400 families statewide.

Families are referred to HUGS by its partner medical centers – Kapi'olani Medical Center for Women and Children, Tripler Medical Center and Kaiser Medical Center – as well as other appropriate medical services. HUGS serves children, youth and young adults under 21 with diseases and ailments ranging from cancer and cardiac issues, to liver and kidney ailments, to rare diseases.

"HUGS serves the child's family at no cost for any of HUGS services or programs. We offer a range of comprehensive programs and services to lessen the emotional and financial

hardships that arise in these situations," said Joan.

Programs are provided at no cost to qualified families due to HUGS' generous donors and sponsors who give donations, both in-kind and in cash, as well as gifted airline miles to help neighbor island-based families receive treatment on O'ahu, and for others to visit the U.S. continent for care. Other supporters donate their time and talent in volunteering to organize events and other efforts to support families.

"Some of the programs we currently provide our families include family events, monthly and emergency respite care, peer support programs like Mom's & Dad's Night, hospital outreach, our Ho'okele case management program, as well as airfare and financial assistance," said Joan.

HUGS relies upon support from community citizens and organizational partners to meet their mission.

When a child is diagnosed with a life-threatening illness, the impact on each family member is significant. But each family member may be impacted in different ways.

- **Emotionally** – Fear, uncertainty, sadness, and anxiety are the immediate emotions that members of the family experience, compounded by the additional stress that occurs with mounting medical bills while also handling the responsibilities of daily life such as work, school and home.
- **Physically** – The experience of caring for a seriously ill child is taxing and stressful.
- **Financially** – Parents often have to take time off from work or quit their job to be with their child in the hospital, resulting in a substantial loss of income. Medical bills can range from thousands to millions of dollars which health insurance may not cover.
- **Family Life** – A childhood illness impacts the entire family, sometimes putting a strain on family relationships. Individual family members can suffer from depression, anxiety and react with anger.



**HUGS supports the entire family when their child has a serious illness. We offer a range of comprehensive programs and services to lessen the emotional and financial hardships that arise. Programs are provided at no cost to qualified families.**



“With a small staff, we heavily rely upon volunteers, community organizations, schools, faith-based organizations, partner nonprofits, local businesses and others to make sure that HUGS children and families are strong, healthy and resilient to achieve a better future for themselves,” said Alex.

HUGS staff, small but tight-knit and determined, is very committed to ensuring their families are supported throughout their very challenging journey of facing serious childhood illness head-on.

“In all of the services and programs we provide, we aim to create joyful and memorable experiences for our children and families. Our family events and respite activities are filled with games and fun activities that allow them to rejuvenate and forget their problems for a few moments,” said Joan.

Halloween costume contests, scavenger hunts and online magic shows are just a few examples of programming HUGS has offered in the past year.

“When a family tells them thank you or a child gives us a hug, or we see smiles and hear laughter from our families, these are the memorable moments that fill our hearts,” said Joan.

The organization works in the Kailua area with families often, and has many donors and supporters in the area.

“Our vision is for all families caring for seriously ill children in Hawai'i have access to a holistic support system that wraps around them like a hug,” said Denise. “We strive to continue to provide opportunities to connect, come together, learn, relax and have fun, and find normalcy amid very challenging circumstances. With this holistic support, families can build their resilience and strength to move forward.”

To learn more about HUGS, their services and how you can help, visit: <https://www.hugshawaii.org/>.

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