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## Need grows for seniors' meals

### More than 300 join in annual march to support food program

*By Dan Nakaso*

More than 300 senior citizens, children and others carrying signs reading "End Senior Hunger" and "Our Kupuna Need You" marched from Honolulu Hale to the state Capitol yesterday to raise awareness about the elderly who rely on the state's biggest food program for seniors on O'ahu, Lanakila Meals on Wheels.

Yesterday marked the seventh annual march and came at a time when Lanakila Meals on Wheels has a waiting list of 300 names, with more added every day, said Brandon Mitsuda, the program's deputy director.

Maria Loa, 83, of Waikiki, has participated in every march and has been receiving Meals on Wheels for six years.

The meal delivery to Loa once a day "really, really, really, really, really helps," she said. "It means a lot."

While donations are badly needed, Mitsuda said, Lanakila also needs hundreds of volunteers for a variety of jobs, including helping with 19 Kupuna Wellness Centers and delivering food to hundreds of senior citizens across O'ahu.

Last year, Lanakila served more than 250,000 meals to seniors "while food costs are ever-rising and government funding remains flat," Mitsuda said.

Mayor Mufi Hannemann yesterday ran down a list of troubling statistics:

- Nineteen percent of Hawai'i residents are 60 years or older; by 2020 the percentage will grow to one out of every four people.
- Some 35,000 senior citizens have a disability and no access to healthy meals.

Before leading the march, Hannemann pumped up the crowd with the reason why they turned out:

"To ensure that government never forgets its responsibility to show compassion for our kupuna," Hannemann said. "No matter what our fiscal challenges are, we cannot forget funding for our seniors."

Among the participants were 36 students from Holy Family Catholic Academy, including student body president Travis Briones, 13, an eighth-grader from Makaha who wants to give back to an earlier generation.

"We are all gathered to help the seniors because they get one meal a day and probably less," Briones said.

Abby Waller, an eighth-grader and a member of the National Junior Honor Society, did her own research in preparation for yesterday's march and was stunned by what she found.

"One in five senior citizens lives below the poverty line on O'ahu," Abby said.

In fact, according to Lanakila, the median income of Hawai'i residents age 60 and older is only \$19,115. Of that group, almost 31 percent of them have incomes below \$10,000.

"It was horrible to see," Abby said. "These are the people who fought for our country."

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