



TINA YUEN

Jenny Lee says the Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice will tackle the state's tax policies in the new legislative session.

## HOW I...

# Advocate for people on the lower rungs of Hawaii's economic ladder

BY JENNY LEE, STAFF ATTORNEY FOR THE HAWAII APPLESEED CENTER FOR LAW AND ECONOMIC JUSTICE

Hawaii Appleseed was founded as Lawyers for Equal Justice and brought its first case in 2004, helping low-income tenants receive reimbursement for rent overcharges.

For the next seven years, Appleseed brought cases related to public housing conditions, timely processing of food stamp applications, access to education for homeless kids, health care coverage for Compact of Free Association migrants, and more.

However, there are many issues that limit the opportunities of low-income people that cannot be addressed through litigation. So, in 2011, we joined the Appleseed network of public interest law centers to expand the kinds of advocacy we do. The center relies on individual donors, foundations, and attorneys' fees.

At its root, poverty is a problem of having too little income. People are not poor because of some moral failing or character flaw, but because of an economic system that does not give adequate opportunity. When this

### ► CLOSER LOOK

#### Jenny Lee

Staff Attorney, Hawaii Appleseed Center for Law and Economic Justice

**Address:** P.O. Box 37952, Honolulu, HI 96837

**Phone:** (808) 587-7605

**Website:** [www.hiappleseed.org](http://www.hiappleseed.org)

is compounded by gaps in the social safety net, or violations of the rights of people in poverty, the problem is only exacerbated.

Direct services are needed to alleviate the immediate impact of poverty, but we also need to address the problems upstream to actually end poverty. Right now, many workers simply cannot find jobs that pay enough to support their families. They deserve genuine opportunities, and we seek to protect their rights and advocate for their interests to create them.

We use multiple strategies to advance low-income communities. Litigation allows us to ensure

that the rights of low-income people are protected. We decided to expand into other forms of advocacy that would allow us to be more proactive. Litigation is generally reactive – we can sue only when there has been some legal harm, and it's difficult to use the law to advance protections for disenfranchised groups.

We now work on policy and legislative advocacy, build community support for issues, and try to bring together diverse groups to see that poverty is an issue that underlies all of the issues we face in Hawaii – struggling students, poor health, homelessness, and so on.

Our top priorities for the next legislative session are related to economic justice and more progressive tax policy: adjusting the renters and food/excise tax credits for inflation since they were last set, creating a state earned income tax credit, and eliminating income tax liability on households in poverty.

Our tax system is highly regressive because of the GET – low-income households have

to spend all of their income just to stay afloat and pay a much larger share of their income in taxes than the wealthy do. At the same time, many households in poverty actually owe income taxes. It simply makes no sense to tax people deeper into poverty. The refundable credits help mitigate some of this, and creating a state earned income tax credit is another way to do so for working families, especially those with children.

We will also be supporting additional appropriations for the Rental Housing Trust Fund, especially an affordable microunit development, as well as funding for Housing First programs to end chronic homelessness. Another priority is the creation of a limited purpose drivers license that will reduce the amount of documentation required so more low-income people, immigrants, elders, and others will have access to a license.

As told to PBN reporter Lorin Eleni Gill. She can be reached at 955-8035 and at [lgill@bizjournals.com](mailto:lgill@bizjournals.com)