

## MEO's profile for AFOP's 50th Anniversary

Maui Economic Opportunity, Inc. (MEO), was established in 1965 under the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. MEO is the designated Community Action agency for Maui County, operating more than 40 programs to support infants and toddlers, youth, disenfranchised and low income individuals, immigrants, persons with disabilities and seniors. MEO is the National Farmworker Jobs Program (NFJP) grantee for the state of Hawaii.

MEO launched the "Seasonally Employed Farmworkers Program" on March 1, 1975, with 18 participants. During the 1970s and '80s, pineapple and sugar were the main agricultural industries in Hawaii. MEO assisted a couple hundred Filipino farm workers each year with education and medical assistance, child care, English as a Second Language and job placement, resulting in higher wages and benefits.

In the early '80s, MEO operated under the Job Training Partnership Act Seasonally Employed Farmworkers Program, and in 1987, the services were provided under the Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers (MSFW) program. Due to a lack of jobs on the island, MEO coordinated ferry transportation for more than 30 workers to and from the island of Molokai and Lahaina Town on Maui Island, where there were long term unsubsidized employment opportunities.

By 1990, Hawaii was experiencing a severe labor shortage. Many farmworkers flocked to hospitality industry jobs, which were more attractive due to working conditions and pay. In response, MEO partnered with other MSFW grantees, known as the Rocky Mountain High Coalition (RMHC) and recruited laborers from Mexico in 1994. The RMHC was composed of community-based agencies from California, Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, Montana, Colorado, Idaho and Hawaii. The coalition assembled to provide employment opportunities to migrant and seasonal farmworkers. Over a two-year period, MEO and RMHC worked with Maui Pineapple Company, Wailuku Ag Business, and other local independent farmers to bring much needed agricultural labor to Maui Island. The success of the RMHC program sparked interest in agricultural industries on the islands of Oahu and Hawaii. The program assisted the migrants by placing them in jobs working the fields, in canneries and machine shops, and helping them obtain Commercial Driver License, heavy equipment operator and welding certifications and more. The migrants were provided dormitory-style housing by Maui Pineapple, and program staff assisted with placement in permanent housing, education opportunities, industry certifications, child care, ESL and Citizenship classes and acculturation to stabilize the lives of the migrants and their families. With MEO's assistance, many of the migrants became citizens. Today, more than 10% of Maui's population identifies as Hispanic or Latino and many of them have ties to the migrant workers brought to Maui from Mexico to work in the fields.

To date, the MEO NFJP program has assisted more than 2,500 migrant and seasonal farmworkers and their families with establishing and achieving employment and life goals, furthering their education, industry credentialing, child care, acculturation, learning English, citizenship, securing permanent housing and obtaining and maintaining jobs that provide benefits and pay a living wage.