Executive Director Gladys Baisa. The BEST House will open, she said, "as soon as we can shake the money loose."

MEO Deputy Director Sandy Baz said the partners plan to develop the transitional housing on a 9-acre Waikiki property. Organizers are still in discussions with a potential donor of the property.

Planning and design are expected to begin by October or November, and will be made possible by a federal Community Development Block Grant of nearly $300,000 being funneled through Maui County.

MEO also is awaiting the release of $1 million earmarked by the state Legislature for construction of the house, with work expected to begin in 2005. Baz said. He said MEO also hopes to obtain additional federal housing money to support the operations of BEST House.

Baz hopes community response will mirror the positive reaction at a recent Rotary Club meeting to the BEST House concept as a way to provide inmates a smooth transition back into the community.

"They are coming out anyway," he said.

Inmates and the community will be better served with those leaving prison getting help to restart their lives, he said. Without assistance, he said, it's more likely former inmates will "go back to what they know."

But MEO also intends to inform the community with public meetings as part of the planning process.

Shirley Lamarr, replication coordinator for the Delancey Street Foundation, said the program and MEO fit together perfectly. Delancey has five programs across the country – in Los Angeles, New York, New Mexico, North Carolina and San Francisco – while developing partnerships in other areas, such as Alaska and now Maui.

Lamarr is a Delancey Street graduate herself, a former heroin addict and felon, who described Delancey's "re-education" facilities as "the Harvard for the bottom 2 percent." She served prison time for attempted murder, robbery and burglary, but said she has changed her life 180 degrees, learning job skills and now being an administrator with the program.

"It's like jumping to the moon," she said.

In a Delancey Street "house," participants need to work to attain their high school equivalency degree before going into hands-on job training. When participants leave, they have received training in at least three job skills and have had an opportunity to supervise and work out their management talents.

MEO officials were enthusiastic about the partnership because of the successes of individuals such as Lamarr and of Delancey's programs. In its 33 years, more than 14,000 clients have graduated from Delancey Street programs.

The Delancey Street Foundation does not solicit government funding, but sets up a number of businesses – a bookstore, restaurant and moving company – that provide jobs to clients while keeping the overall program self-sufficient.

Kong said the MEO partnership has not decided yet what kinds of businesses it will attempt to set up on Maui, but a restaurant is one option.

She said the Delancey group visiting Maui this week suggested the Maui house get into the entertainment field after a performance by BEST participants.

A BEST program includes an MCCC hula, Na Pa'ahao Maoli ("The True Prisoners"), which provides hula performers for community functions and which danced at the presentation Tuesday.

Kong, herself an accomplished performer familiar with the realities of the entertainment business, said she was leaning more toward a restaurant.

SHIRLEY LAMARR
Life changed 180 degrees

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