

MEO, Delancey offer reintegration option

'BEST House' will provide training, jobs for ex-cons

By **MELISSA TANJI**
Staff Writer

WAILUKU — Maui ex-convicts will get a chance to develop job skills, get an education and have a place to live through a partnership between Maui Economic Opportunity and a San Francisco-based foundation that helps former prison inmates reintegrate into society.

Maui Economic announced Tuesday evening its program with the Delancey Street Foundation to develop a "BEST House" to provide former Maui Community Correctional Center inmates a residential community project modeled after Delancey's San Francisco program.

MEO already coordinates a prisoner reintegration program, BEST, for "Being Empowered and Safe Together." BEST is designed to reduce prison recidivism by providing inmates structured and intense training programs for returning to the community.

Verdine Kong, BEST program director, said the new partnership, with the help of the Eisenhower Foundation, will open up more avenues for rehabilitation for inmates.

Instead of programs within the jail, she said, a Delancey model involves a life skills "house" in which inmates live together like family in transitional housing while jobs are provided through businesses operated by the program.

"This is a big deal," said MEO

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 Wailuku 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



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Na Pa'ahao Maoli, a hula halau of inmates from Maui Community Correctional Center, entertain guests at a Maui Economic Opportunity presentation Tuesday on a partnership with the Delancey Street Foundation. MEO's BEST inmate reintegration program will partner with the foundation to set up a Delancey-style program on Maui, providing a residential facility with training and jobs for prison inmates preparing to return to their communities.

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 halau, 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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