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The Maui Farm

Program shifts focus from foster children to struggling families



The Maui Farm Executive Director Paula Ambre says working in the program's garden is not just therapeutic; it's a way for residents to try healthy foods and learn new ways to be self-sufficient.

PAIA - One week on the beach was enough for Charmaine Ahuna.

The restaurant server and her family had been comfortably sharing a home, when the other family they were living with moved out. Even with two months to look, they couldn't find another house they could afford on their own. Her husband worked as a wedding minister, but business was slow. Before she knew it, she was living - pregnant - on the beach at Maalaea with her husband and three sons.

"One week we were homeless," she said. "In that week, we decided we didn't want that life."

Today, Ahuna cradles her 3-week-old baby - another boy - while resting in a wicker chair on the porch of her cottage at The Maui Farm. The family hasn't left hardship behind; on top of everything else, Ahuna's husband had a heart attack two months after starting the

program and is still recovering. But she's hoping to be accepted into a certified nursing assistant program, and sees her family slowly getting back on its feet.

"There is help out there," she said. "You just need to reach for it."



Ray, and three older sons toss a football around Thursday afternoon in the program's shared backyard. The Ahuna family moved into The Maui Farm after spending a week living homeless on the beach

The Ahunas represent a new generation of Maui Farm clients. The Upcountry nonprofit for years housed foster children in four family-style group homes on its 8.3-acre campus a few miles above Paia. But when the state Department of Health and Human Services changed its policies and began placing more foster children with relatives and families, and fewer in group homes, The Maui Farm overhauled its program, said Executive Director Paula Ambre.

The organization began taking whole families trying to escape abuse or homelessness, with referrals coming from Women Helping Women and the Family Life Center.

"We now have an opportunity to prevent youth from going into foster care - and that's really exciting for us," said Program Director Donna Vida. "The major goal is to keep that family intact."

A second Maui Farm program provides a cottage with rent-free housing and an independent living program to as many as five girls aged 17 to 24 who are transitioning out of the foster care system or have trouble getting by on their own.

For the Family Strengthening Program, three cottages are available, housing one or two families each for six to 12 months. Families pay rent from \$450 to \$1,100 per month, based on the number of rooms they are using. Each family is required to participate in parenting and life-skills classes and is matched with an "advocate" who works in their home to provide support and mentoring.

The program also incorporates The Maui Farm's tradition of working the land, with participating families required to help care for the facility's community garden and animals, including pigs and goats. Families who enjoy it can get their own garden plot. Gardening is a healthy activity families can enjoy together and can be therapeutic, Vida said. It also shows people how to be more self-sufficient, and introduces them to new fruits and vegetables.

"Taking care of the animals and plants, it teaches responsibility - and they love it," Vida said. "We're really introducing a healthier lifestyle."

Major funding for the Family Strengthening Program has come from the county in line-item grants of \$280,000 in 2007 and 2008. Ambre said she was closely monitoring the county's tight budget situation this year. Mayor Charmaine Tavares has previously asked nonprofits to prepare for a 10 percent cut in county grants, a reduction that would affect the Maui Farm program.



Charmaine Ahuna holds newborn son

But Ambre said she felt the program was in a good position overall, and she was hoping it could even expand to provide services like parenting classes to nonresident clients.

"We're staying positive," she said.

The Maui Farm also accepts volunteers, including gardeners to help with its farming program, and is recruiting for its board of directors.

Family Life Center Executive Director Maude Cummings said the new Maui Farm family program was an opportunity to give more intensive and long-term support to families who were serious about getting on their feet.

The program has had a good track record of helping families transition to living on their own in the community, she said.

Cummings said the Family Life Center looked closely at families before referring them to The Maui Farm, and wanted to find people who were really ready to change their lives and make a commitment to the program.

"We're always on the lookout," she said.

Ahuna said she was referred to The Maui Farm after looking for help from the Family Life Center while her family was homeless.

Meeting all the requirements of the program, including attending classes, has sometimes been tough, coming on top of all the other demands being balanced by the struggling family. But Ahuna said she's learned a lot from the parenting classes - more than the four-time mother thought she would.

She's already practicing some of the tips, like listening to her children more, praising them and letting them make more decisions for themselves. Ahuna said she was learning that her job as a mother wasn't to always be in control, but to help her children learn to do things for themselves.

The family was still struggling, but Ahuna said she wanted to stick with the program so she could show her children how to stay on solid financial footing when they're adults. "We've come a long way," she said.