

Maui Economic Opportunity, Inc.

Maui, HI

Overview

Maui Economic Opportunity (MEO), Inc., provides a safe, nurturing, high-quality, and developmentally appropriate program for preschool children. The program values each child's self-worth and encourages and supports the family as a whole unit. Early childhood services are provided through a network of 15 Head Start centers throughout the county.

MEO's Head Start programs take place in the context of a larger community action program whose mission is to help the low-income elderly, children and youth, people with disabilities, immigrants, other disadvantaged people, and the general public help themselves so that they may become self-sufficient and enrich their lives. In addition to Head Start, MEO offers youth programs, senior services, emergency assistance, job training and placement, small business loans, reintegration services for individuals who have been incarcerated, transportation for participants, and a host of other services.

MEO is in a rural community on the Hawaiian island of Maui and serves low- and middle-income families. Community issues addressed by the program include substance abuse, domestic violence, homelessness, dental and medical needs, child welfare, immigration, developmental difficulties, and foster families' needs. While the majority of families served are native Hawaiians or Pacific Islanders, MEO serves a multi-ethnic community on Maui, Molokai, and Lanai that represents the ethnic and cultural diversity of Hawaii. The staff represent the community's diversity.

How the Program Builds Protective Factors

Maui Economic Opportunity, Inc. builds five key protective factors that reduce child abuse and neglect. Programs,

Profile

Children & Families Served

Head Start: 300

Children attend 3-5 times per week

Budget

\$3 million

Centers

15 county-wide

Services Provided On-Site

- Developmental screenings
- Emergency assistance
- Employment training
- Head Start
- Health care services and referrals
- Home visits
- Job training and placement
- Post-incarceration reintegration services
- Referrals to social services
- Senior services
- Small business loans
- Training on issues of child abuse and neglect
- Transportation
- Youth services and programs

services, and characteristics contributing to each protective factor are listed below:

Parental Resilience

- Family Advocates
- Family Partnership Agreement Plan
- Ohana Family Strengthening Program
- Parent Volunteers
- Parental Decision Making

Social Connections

- Groups and Social Gatherings
- Ohana Family Strengthening Program
- Parent Volunteers

Knowledge of Parenting and Child Development

- Family Advocates
- Parent Volunteers
- Staff partnerships with families

Concrete Support in Times of Need

- Family Advocates
- Health services and referrals
- Ohana Family Strengthening Program
- Service-Rich Environment

Social and Emotional Competence of Children

- Head Start model including mental health consultation
- Groups and Social Gatherings
- Transition Support
- Staff partnerships with families

Key Program Features

Free to Grow

Maui Economic Opportunity is one of 15 sites nationwide for the Free to Grow program demonstration. Free to Grow strengthens families by embedding substance abuse programming in Head Start and building community resilience against substance abuse. The target area for MEO's Free To Grow program is Wailuku, Maui, which includes two low-income housing complexes, a large

Partners

- Child Welfare Services
- Head Start: Information about child development is shared with families and across agencies
- Homeless shelter: Childcare and family support for homeless families
- Red Cross: CPR and First Aid classes
- Multiple agencies: Cross training

Staff Resources

Staff receive the following types of training on issues of child abuse and neglect:

- Identification and reporting (Annual training also includes parents)
- Family strengthening and intervention

Identifying Families at Risk

- Staff and parent training on mandated reporting and indicators of child abuse and neglect
- Outreach to families with special-needs children, unemployment, substance abuse, and other risk factors

elementary school, a prison, and a homeless shelter. Wailuku has the highest reported rates of child abuse and domestic abuse in Maui County and also has high rates of alcohol and methamphetamine abuse. The cultural norm is to include alcohol in all celebrations, including a baby's first birthday luau.

Free to Grow is funded nationally by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation and the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation. At MEO, the program is also supported through a grant from the Housing and Community Development Corporation of Hawaii to reduce drug dependency at two public housing developments in Wailuku.

Family Advocates

Family Advocates work with families to develop a Family Partnership Agreement Plan and visit with families at least four times per school year; the child's teacher joins them for initial and final home visits.

Family Advocates provide parents with information on parenting, child development, and available community resources and provide referrals for mental health, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, and domestic violence services. They connect families to relevant community resources and provide home visits to nurture parents and children in their homes. The advocates work with other agencies to share information on parenting and child development classes and workshops with Head Start parents. MEO can provide qualified parents with fee and tuition waivers to help them attend.

If during the initial assessment the Family Advocate and the parents identify issues that need intensive work or support, the advocate refers the family to a case manager. The ratio of case workers to families is 1:20.

Family Partnership Agreement Plan

The Family Partnership Agreement Plan is an assessment of family strengths, capabilities, needs, and goals. A Family Advocate helps each Head Start family complete a plan at the start of each academic year and review it again at the end of the year. The comprehensive intake process engages parents in their first contact with MEO and demonstrates the important role parents play in their children's lives.

What People Say

"You will not find another organization where love and support radiate from the highest level of administration down to the teachers."

—Parent

"Being a part of Maui Economic Opportunity, I feel I can do anything that comes my way."

—Parent

Individual agreements are developed to identify and assist families in reaching specific goals. Each child is recognized as unique with specific development and needs.

As part of the plan, staff review with parents the program's policies and inform them about celebrations and cultural events, community services, opportunities to volunteer, and confidentiality provisions.

Groups and Social Gatherings

Children participate in group activities to promote their learning process. Parents, also come to regularly scheduled sessions where they discuss common problems and build support networks. In addition, MEO sponsors annual family fun days and organizes and informs families about cultural events to encourage them to connect with each other.

Health Emphasis

A complete assessment is provided by the program to give children a good start toward physical health, nutrition, admission, and health requirements. If this assessment raises any concerns about a child's health status, a Family Advocate or case manager helps connect the family to appropriate resources.

MEO Head Start connects families to a medical home and to Quest (free medical and dental care) if they do not have insurance. Low-income families are also referred to the Women, Infants and Children program, (WIC), which provides healthy foods at no cost. Staff circulate a monthly newsletter, *Smart Food*, that provides information on healthy, low-cost eating. Community resources such as the Hawaii Department of Health's *Keiki O'Hawaii / Resource Directory for Parents of Young Children* are available for parents in MEO's waiting rooms.

The Health Specialist sits on the island's Nutritional Council and Health Advisory Board. This helps to make sure that the program is connected to the network of health initiatives across the island.

Ohana Family Strengthening Program

Part of Free to Grow, the Ohana Family Strengthening Program trains family members as community leaders. Family members form community action groups to build

drug-free community-school partnerships and identify key risks and protective factors unique to Maui's culture.

MEO builds on the Hawaiian concept of family (*ohana*). Ohana extends beyond the nuclear family to include the land, the sea, and all creatures. Everything and everyone is cared for by all. The Ohana Family Strengthening Program relies on and builds a web of support where families are embedded. This program provides services available to parents and children through Free to Grow to all extended family members.

Parent Volunteers

Parents can play many roles as volunteers in the classroom. A classroom volunteer helps parents understand these different roles and how they can carry out the program's philosophy on discipline, learning, and creativity. Every quarter, MEO honors its parent volunteers, and on Valentine's Day, the program provides a catered lunch and special recognition ceremony for them.

Volunteer opportunities give parents a way to observe and learn about child development practices and develop social connections with other parents.

Parental Decision Making

At least one parent from each of the 15 MEO Head Start sites sits on the Head Start Policy Council. This council plans the curriculum and assists in policy decisions. Parents also have input in menu planning, program self-assessment, hiring staff, and selecting training opportunities. Curriculum planning meetings occur monthly, and parents are notified of them one week in advance. During the meeting, the teaching staff and parents plan a monthly calendar, including field trips, themes, learning opportunities, snacks and meals, and resources and visitors to bring to their programs. This provides an opportunity for parents to be actively engaged in planning and making decisions about the learning experience provided by Head Start.

Additionally, all staff demonstrate the program's recognition of parents as their children's first and most important teachers. Head Start staff enter into a "compassionate partnership" with each family to best shape the future of the child. Parents attend two parent-teacher conferences each year. Weekly lesson plans are posted on the parent board

located in the classroom. Staff provide take-home activities that enhance parents' knowledge of parenting and child development, and a monthly newsletter extends the Creative Curriculum used in children's classrooms into the home.

Parents engage in goal setting with teachers twice each year and help measure their children's progress. They are encouraged to participate in curriculum planning and are involved in assessing their children's development and discussing the results.

Service-Rich Environment

MEO embeds Head Start in a host of programs that support economic opportunity and meet other needs:

- HELP, the Hawaii Emergency Laulima Partnership, helps families impacted by the drop in tourism after September 11, 2001.
- A new community-prison reintegration project is working to reduce recidivism and assist those who have been incarcerated in finding jobs.
- The only quasi-public transportation program in the county is offered by MEO; all Head Start families are eligible.

The organization also provides job training, youth development and other programs. The richness of this service environment helps ensure that Head Start families who need additional supports can connect with them easily. Head Start programs are strategically located in places that allow parents to connect to the larger community.

Special-Needs Support

At least ten percent of the children served by MEO's Head Start program each year have disabilities related to health, hearing, speech, vision, orthopedics, learning, emotional disorders, and/or other issues. The program coordinates services and provides classrooms for special-needs children who qualify under the U.S. Department of Education criteria. Children with disabilities are included in all activities and routines. Parents are involved to ensure that their goals are met and that the children's skill building can be continued in the home.

Staff with Child Welfare Experience

The Head Start Director is a member of the Child Welfare Services Citizen Review Panel and the State Oral Health Forum. One of the Policy Council Community Representatives is a social worker for Child Welfare Services. These connections help to strengthen both formal and informal links between the MEO and the child welfare agency. For example, child welfare department staff regularly train MEO staff on recognizing and responding to child abuse and neglect. These relationships and informal links also enable child welfare staff to reach out to MEO staff to help maintain childcare continuity and obtain extra support for a child who is removed from his or her home.

Transition Support

MEO provides activities and support to ease the transition between school levels and help families progress smoothly along the education continuum. Information about transitions to and from Head Start is provided to all parents both verbally and in writing, and MEO staff provide parents with handouts to discuss with their children to help them prepare for the change. Planning starts several months before transitions occur.