

## State opens immigration centers on 3 islands - Hawaii News - Honolulu Star-Advertiser

StarAdvertiser.com

### State opens immigration centers on 3 islands

The agencies will help newcomers with jobs, language skills and health services

By Susan Essoyan

POSTED: 01:30 a.m. HST, Nov 07, 2013

-- ADVERTISEMENT --

-- ADVERTISEMENT --

Hawaii's newest immigrants will get a better shot at pursuing the American dream by visiting one of four Immigrant Resource Centers the state is opening.

The state has one of the highest proportions of immigrants in the country with nearly 1 in 5 residents hailing from abroad. The foreign-born population in the islands has grown at twice the rate of Hawaii's overall population since 1990.

New arrivals often struggle to decipher a new language, adjust to different cultural norms, find a job, get a driver's license or even fill out children's forms for school.

The new Immigrant Resource Centers in Kalihi, Ewa Beach, Hilo and Kapaa, Kauai, will offer an open door to help newcomers navigate life in the islands.

"They are going to help immigrants achieve and maintain greater economic self-sufficiency and integration into the Aloha State," Gov. Neil Abercrombie said, announcing a series of opening celebrations from today through Saturday.

The centers are housed and run by nonprofit agencies and funded with \$750,000 this year through the Office of Community Services, part of the state Department of Labor and Industrial Relations.

Mila Medallon-Kaahanui, executive director of the office, said the outreach is sorely needed because immigrants have been "lost in the shuffle" in recent years.

"The restoration of state-funded, comprehensive services for Hawaii's immigrant communities comes after two decades of gaps in services to individuals marginalized by poverty and lack of language access," she said.

Between 1990 and 2010, the foreign-born population in the state grew by more than 50 percent, as compared to a 23 percent rise in the overall population, state data show. Immigrants now make up 18 percent of the state's population, with roughly half of them already U.S. citizens.

The centers will offer an entry point to employment and training programs, English language lessons,

citizenship classes, financial literacy, acculturation and health services. The goal is to help newcomers take full part in the economic, civic and cultural life of the islands.

"We're supposed to be a one-stop place for them to come for answers," said Linda Spencer, coordinator of the new Immigrant Resource Center in Hilo, which is run by Catholic Charities Hawaii and has already opened. "We help the whole family with all of their issues, not just employment."

"One of our newest clients was on the verge of being homeless," she added. "We were able to help him. He's working now and hopefully going to be able to pay his rent and stay in his house."

Spencer has done immigration work for Catholic Charities for years, and said that many people who have received help in the past are stepping up to help other newcomers.

On Oahu, the Kalihi center is run by Parents and Children Together at Kuhio Park Terrace. Child & Family Service will manage the center in Ewa Beach and the one in Kapaa, along with a satellite location in Waimea, Kauai.

The state had intended to open a center on Maui as well, but no agency on that island submitted a proposal. Maui County's Department of Housing and Human Concerns does have an Immigrant Services Division that helps local residents with citizenship issues, referrals, translation and acculturation.

Haaheo Mansfield, senior vice president of programs for PACT, said most of their clients in Kalihi are Chuukese, Marshallese, Chinese and Filipino.

"I always think of Filipino as part of the fabric already but there are new arrivals all the time," she said. "They are still trying to figure out their way like their ancestors did."

Mansfield said newcomer families are eager to learn how they and their children can succeed in their new home, but often are held back by the language barrier.

"We cannot make assumptions that they don't care about their children or that they don't care about being successful workers at the work site," she said. "They care about the same things we care about."

#### **RESOURCE CENTERS**

*The state is opening Immigrant Resource Centers on Oahu, Hawaii island and Kauai.*

- >> Kalihi: Parents and Children Together, Kuhio Park Terrace Family Center, 1485 Linapuni Street, No. 103. Opening celebration, 11 a.m. today.
  - >> Ewa Beach: Child & Family Service Center, 91-1841 Fort Weaver Road. Opening celebration, 11 a.m. Friday.
  - >> Kauai: Child & Family Service, Hale Hoomalu, 4-1112 Kuhio Highway, Kapaa. Opening celebration, 1 p.m. Saturday. The center will also operate at Nana's House, 9875 Waimea Road, Waimea.
  - >> Hilo: Catholic Charities Hawaii, 62 Kinoole St.
- For more information, contact the Office of Community Services at 586-8675.