

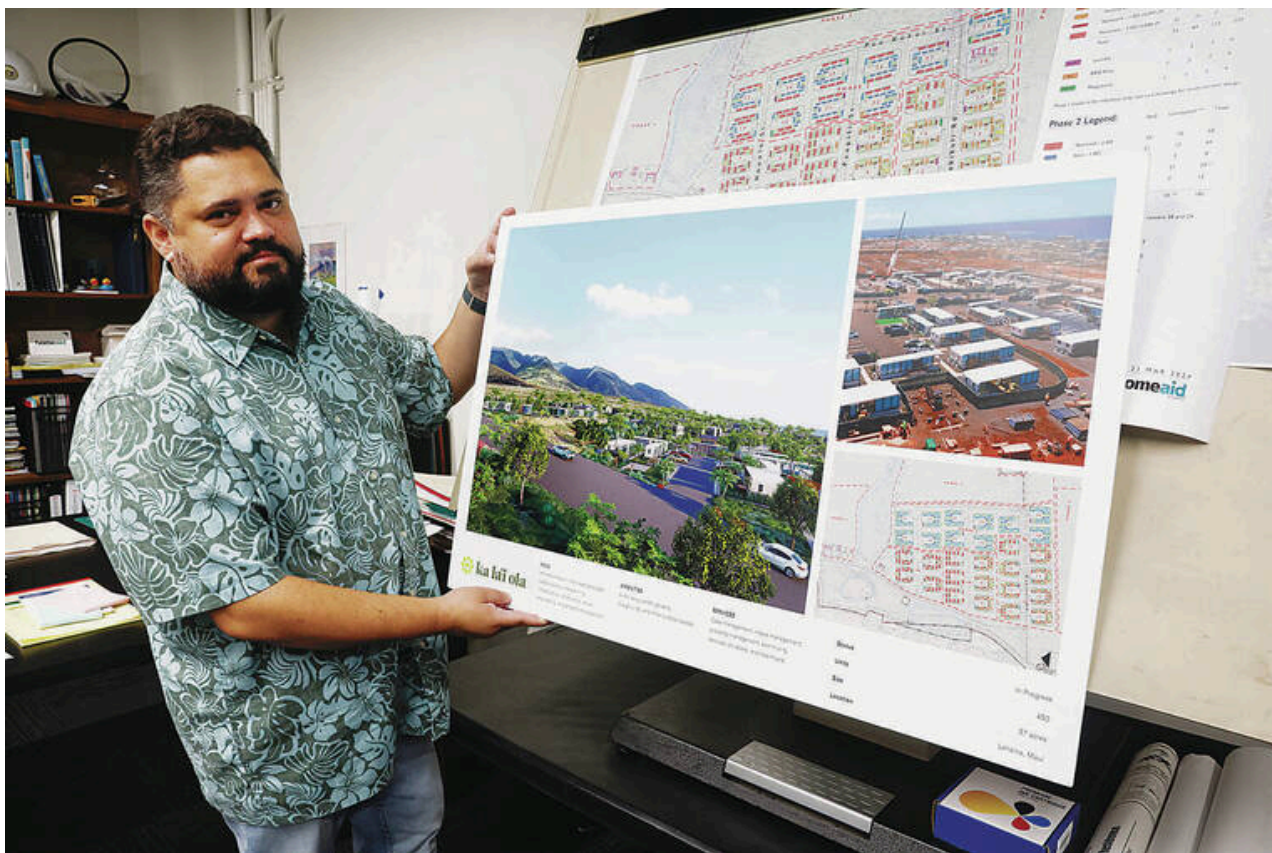
HAWAII NEWS

Maui housing project receives largest wave of wildfire survivors to date



By Dan Nakaso

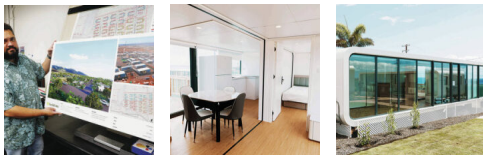
Today • *Last updated 7:56 a.m.*



1/3

GEORGE F. LEE / GLEE@STARADVERTISER.COM

Kimo Carvalho, executive director of kauhale builder HomeAid Hawaii, shown Tuesday, is set to build in Maui County.

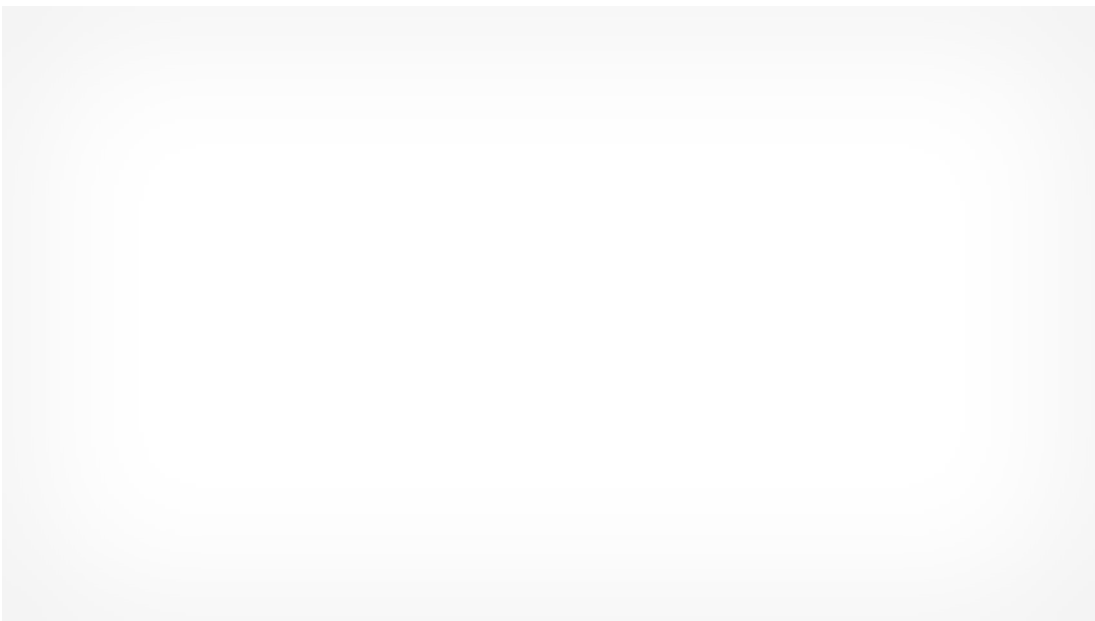


The largest wave of displaced Maui fire survivors, who are losing their temporary hotel housing this month, will move into Ka La'i Ola, a modular housing project mauka of the Lahaina Civic Center designed specifically for survivors who are ineligible for Federal Emergency Management Agency assistance.

The first residents moved into the community Aug. 9, a year and one day after the Aug. 8, 2023, Maui wildfires killed 102 people. The first large group of residents moved into the project in December when they had to be out of FEMA-provided Maui hotels and could not afford the cost of market-rate rents, which continue to go up since the fires destroyed nearly 4,000 structures, most of them homes.

But even more families — about eight per week — are expected to move into Ka La'i Ola this month, when they also have to be out of their hotels, said Ka La'i Ola's new director, Cesar Martinez, who escaped the chaos of the Lahaina inferno.

ADVERTISING



As of Friday, 226 households totaling 635 people had moved into 240 units that vary in size from 260-square-foot studios to 960-square-foot three-bedroom

homes. The residents include 14 multi- generational families — from grandparents to grandchildren — who often live together in neighborhood “pods” but in their own different-size homes.

All 450 units have been erected but await inspection before the last of an expected 1,500 occupants can move into the units. They will live rent-free until September, when builder HomeAid Hawaii has said it will begin charging below-market rent. Rental pricing has yet to be set.

Kimo Carvalho, HomeAid Hawaii’s executive director, said, “The goal is cheap affordability.”

Don't miss out on what's happening!

Stay in touch with breaking news, as it happens, conveniently in your email inbox. It's FREE!

Sign Up

By clicking to sign up, you agree to Star-Advertiser's and Google's [Terms of Service](#) and [Privacy Policy](#).
This form is protected by reCAPTCHA.

Ka La‘i Ola represents Gov. Josh Green’s original promise that all fire survivors would receive help rebuilding their lives even if they were not eligible for FEMA assistance.

They’re ineligible for a long list of reasons: They rented a room or rooms in Lahaina but had no lease to prove residency; had old driver’s licenses that were not updated with a Lahaina address to prove they were living there at the time of the fires; or were earning too much income — but not enough to pay for market-rate rent.

The fires disrupted the lives of thousands of survivors, including creating economic uncertainty for people who lost jobs while they faced higher rents. So for people like the residents moving into Ka La‘i Ola, Carvalho said, “those who were once in the middle class fell into poverty.”

Among the grateful residents of Ka La‘i Ola are Jason Hayase, 49; his daughters Tayler Peligrino-Hayase, 23, and Alexis Peligrino-Hayase, 17, who is graduating this month from Lahaina- luna High School; and Hayase’s 5-year-old granddaughter, Taylor Quinn Hayase.

His son, Leland Hayase, lives in his own studio unit nearby while Jason Hayase, his daughters and granddaughter live in a three-bedroom, two-bathroom modular home that's bigger — and temporarily rent-free — than the one-bedroom apartment they were living in that was destroyed.

"Everybody has their own bedroom now," Jason Hayase said. "We're really, really thankful for the housing."

Everyone in his family grew up in Lahaina, including his parents, his wife — who died in 2021 of colon cancer — and her family.

They don't want to leave, and hope to see Lahaina rebuilt. But there are daily reminders of what they lived through, including using the nearby cane haul road that they used to escape the flames.

Every day, they also see the site of Jason Hayase's parents' house, which was destroyed.

"We live right above Grandma's burned home," Alexis Peligrino-Hayase said. "We drive past her house every day."

They fled Lahaina in a cramped Toyota Sequoia that contained five people and a dog, with only overnight bags.

Left behind were all their important documents, their mother's ashes and everything else they owned.

As Lahaina went up in flames, Jason Hayase went back in, fighting through traffic, to try to retrieve his wife's ashes, only to see their apartment building in flames.

In the aftermath, following everything they went through, everyone in the family continues to process their feelings differently.

"I tell my kids we're fighters," Hayase said. "We've been through the worst already by losing Mom. The fire was something else, but not like losing Mom."

Alexis Peligrino-Hayase still hasn't fully processed all that's happened.

"Honestly, I'm not sure how I coped with it," she said. "In a way, I'm kind of numb to it. I'm trying to stay positive, and I'm graduating and plan to go to UH

(the University of Hawaii at Manoa), possibly studying psychology or business, I'm not sure."

But they appreciate the new home and community they've found at Ka La'i Ola.

When he first got the keys in December, Jason Hayase said, "it was like a Christmas gift to us."

Housing vision

Ka La'i Ola represents the latest partnership between the state and HomeAid Hawaii, the nonprofit hui of Hawaii builders, contractors and architects that continues to build Green's vision of "kauhale" communities to provide permanent housing for homeless people across the state.

The Hawaii Community Foundation, which coordinates and helps Hawaii's nonprofit organizations, provided the largest source of funding for Ka La'i Ola.

An emergency proclamation issued by Green allowing for exemptions like permitting saved the project \$14 million, and labor and material savings through HomeAid Hawaii dropped the overall cost to \$185 million from well over \$200 million, Carvalho said.

Union construction workers were paid in full, but their employers ate some of the payroll to further keep costs down, Carvalho said.

And companies such as Matson also discounted the cost of shipping to help make the project affordable, he said.

"For what we've accomplished, I am proud of where we landed on the cost," Carvalho said.

Except for a slope and overgrown brush, he said, "There was literally nothing there. We had to dynamite blue rock, trench it out, crush the blue rock into gravel and then reuse it to keep costs down. I don't think any developer could have achieved what we have achieved."

Ka La'i Ola was created out of 57 acres of "dirt, rock, brush, nothing," Carvalho said.

There was no water, sewer, electricity or even a paved road to provide access.

A nearby dirt cane haul road that had been blocked by a gate was pressed into service as an emergency evacuation route as the fire destroyed Lahaina while thousands of people were trapped in gridlock while embers rained down on their vehicles.

The road is now paved and provides the main road into and out of Ka Laʻi Ola.

Martinez and several residents, who used the cane haul road to get out of Lahaina during the wildfires, now drive on it every day and are reminded of how they escaped with their lives.

The property is owned by the Hawaiʻi Housing Finance & Development Corp., which leases it to the state Department of Human Services for use by the interim housing community.

The lease ends June 30, 2029, and the land will be turned over to the state Department of Hawaiian Home Lands to provide homes for Native Hawaiians on the DHHL waitlist. Until then it is intended to provide interim housing to allow residents to remain in Lahaina and figure out their next steps as Lahaina continues to rebuild.

“We keep hearing, ‘I just want to go home,’” Carvalho said.

Creating community

HomeAid used Green’s kauhale concept to encourage community interaction to create Ka Laʻi Ola “pods” — or clusters of different-size homes that face each other.

Research shows that having a sense of community reduces stress and anxiety and reduces the risk of physical issues like heart attacks, Carvalho said.

Ka Laʻi Ola has been built within walking distance of the Lahaina Civic Center, so residents can attend regular updates on the recovery effort.

Community playgrounds are planned for the site, which already has communal barbecue areas, a community Easter gathering and mental health counselors who visit residents.

The Maui Food Bank also distributes food, and a mobile veterinary clinic treats residents’ pets.

A job fair and financial literacy classes are planned to help residents prepare for their next chapters. Martinez wants to learn financial literacy so he can one day buy a house of his own.

Everyone at Ka La'i Ola, including Martinez, continues to deal with the trauma of the wildfires and the uncertainty of what lies ahead.

He lost the two-bedroom, one-bath ohana unit he rented with his girlfriend and three children for \$2,500 a month — along with his 2010 Jeep Patriot and his job as a district manager for Ulu Lani Shave Ice, which was destroyed in the inferno.

His three children also lost their school, historic King Kamehameha III Elementary.

Before Ulu Lani, Martinez worked as the food and beverage manager and spa manager at the Montage Hotel.

But he could not return to work smiling and serving tourists after the tragedy.

“We all lived through it, so we tried to stay away from tourists taking pictures of the burn zone and people parking in people’s driveways,” Martinez said. “I knew I wanted to be part of the solution and not part of the problem, and help Lahaina rebuild.”

Martinez specifically wanted to help survivors like himself and got hired in January as the new director at Ka La'i Ola, which included a three-bedroom, two-bath modular home for him and his girlfriend, sons ages 9 and 8, and 4-year-old daughter.

At the age of 41, Martinez called working with the residents of Ka La'i Ola “one of the biggest blessings to come out of the fire.”

“I can hands down say this is the best job I’ve ever had,” he said. “I’ve never been told ‘God bless you’ so many times in my life. When you give someone the keys, they know they have a home here until 2029.”



2 COMMENTS



