

# HonoluluAdvertiser.com

## **LEADERSHIP CORNER; Executive Director**

*A weekly look at Hawai'i's leaders and their ideas*

BUSINESS; Pg. 3C  
Hao Sean, Staff  
Monday, February 16, 2004

Bob Agres  
Age: 51  
Organization: Hawai'i Alliance for Community-Based Economic Development (HACBED).  
High School: St. Anthony, Wailuku, Maui  
College: Loyola Marymount University and Southern New Hampshire University

Question: What does your agency do?

Answer: The Hawai'i Alliance for Community Based Economic Development works to advance economic, social, and environmental justice in Hawai'i through community-based economic development - that is, economic development approaches that bring the power of community vision and values together with the requirements of economic feasibility.

We advocate to policy-makers and the public that viable solutions exist within communities and should be implemented in partnership with the public and private sectors to strengthen and diversify our economy.

We provide training and technical assistance to nonprofit organizations and communities that are implementing economic development ventures. This

can range from business planning support to strategic planning for a community vision of their economic future.

Q: What factors lead families to struggle to make it in Hawai'i?

A: There are many factors that make it difficult for Hawai'i's families to survive, including the need for more quality jobs that pay a living wage, high cost of living, particularly housing, and lack of access to capital.

The economic environment in Hawai'i makes it extremely difficult for families to create, preserve, and leverage assets such as a house or small business.

Q: What does available research tell us about struggling families?

A: If you think about the fact that one out of every four families in Hawai'i would not have sufficient income to survive at the poverty level for three months without other support, it says to me that many of our local residents are only a step away from serious financial hardship if not being homeless. Our homes have the highest value in the nation but only 55 percent of our families own their own house - the second lowest percentage in the nation.

According to the Self-Sufficiency Standard for Hawai'i, only two of the top 10 occupations in Hawai'i provide wages that would allow a single parent with two or more children to meet their basic needs. So, it's not surprising that a study conducted by the Center on the Family at UH revealed that more than 50 percent of families interviewed identified "financial strain" as being their greatest challenge. At the same time, more than half of the families said that "spending time together" contributed most to making their lives better. That's getting harder to do as families struggle to make ends meet by taking on multiple jobs.

As our economy begins to turn the corner, we have to ask ourselves: are our families really benefiting?

Q: What needs to be done to address this problem?

A: First and foremost we need to engage in a public dialogue that starts from the premise that economic development and the strength of our economy should be measured from the perspective of the impact on families. We also feel that efforts to address poverty should strike a balance between income maintenance and generation activities and initiatives to assist people to create and keep assets.

Q: How and why should economic development strategies address family self-sufficiency?

A: As I mentioned previously, the key indicator of success for economic development should be the status of Hawai'i's families. Will a specific venture or strategy lift people out of poverty or will only a few benefit at the expense of a few? If so, we should question the motivations for such an initiative.

Further, what effect will it have on the health and cultural values of our families? If we do not promote economic development that is beneficial to all of Hawai'i's families then we will continue down a road of subservience and large scale economic inequality.

Q: What is the biggest challenge in your job?

A: We're a big believer in Einstein's thought that "no problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it - we must learn to see the world anew." We facilitate dialogue and public discourse that encourages people to challenge their own assumptions, see issues from many different perspectives, learn from that to create viable solutions, and inspires them to action within their organizations and community.

We try to do this by starting with ourselves - to build HACBED as a learning organization. That's our biggest challenge.

Q: What is the goal behind the upcoming conference "Families Defining Economic Success - Redefining Wealth and Poverty in Hawai'i?" (The event will be held Feb. 25-27 at the Waikiki Marriot Hotel.)

A: The goal of our conference is to begin a dialogue around building assets

for all of Hawai'i's families. This includes housing, savings for education or starting a business, preserving health as an asset, and promoting living wage jobs. We are hoping that this will create momentum for a comprehensive asset building policy agenda to lift up our families out of dependence and into self-sufficiency.

Q: Why focus on assets?

A: We all know that assets can help protect us during hard times or they can be leveraged to create new opportunities. Having a house can make it easier to provide for your child's

education, while having savings in the bank can put food on the table if you temporarily lose a job.

Typically only the wealthy have the luxury of accumulating assets, yet new research and programs have shown that an asset building approach can lift people out of poverty.

Assets are important for all of Hawai'i's families, that is why we feel it is so important to start this discussion.

INTERVIEWED BY Sean Hao,  
ADVERTISER STAFF WRITER