

Partnerships are Nurtured to Protect a Culture Steeped in Tradition

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YouTube Video Here: [Honoring Traditions: Federal Efforts to Respect Hawaiian Culture in Maui's Recovery](#)

LAHAINA, Hawaiʻi – Each day, work crews clearing debris from the burned areas greet the rising and setting sun in prayer.

In their dusty, steel-toed boots and neon vests, these men and women form a circle, their rhythmic clapping a signal of their physical, emotional and spiritual connection to each other and the land they labor over. They believe the blessing, or pule, keeps them safe from the dangers they navigate daily.

In Lahaina, cultural ceremonies are as commonplace in safety protocols as donning protective gear or hazmat equipment.

Since August 2023, federal disaster workers called to Maui as part of the massive response mission to help the thousands of families who lost their loved ones and homes have been introduced to a different way of conducting business. A way that is more considerate of the multicultural communities they serve.

The respect for culture in this federal disaster response began with the first presidential visit to Maui last Aug. 21. Native Hawaiian cultural leaders chose one of the most sacred sites in all of Hawaiʻi for the historic meeting and tribute to their ancestors and their rich traditions and values.

Mokuʻula, whose roots date back to the sixteenth century, is that place. An acre of land, it sits on the eastern side of Lahaina off Front Street and the bustling commercial district that existed before the fires. It is the cultural center of Maui and ancestral home to the island's legendary chiefs. Mokuʻula is revered by Native Hawaiians nostalgic for the return of the spring-fed canals and underground streams that carved a path from the mountains to the ocean, irrigating surrounding taro patches and breadfruit trees.



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Lahaina of those days was blessed with abundance, so much water that early Europeans christened the town the Venice of the Pacific. Moku?ula is part of the collective Hawaiian memory and the power it evokes, said Summer Sylva, a federal appointee to the Maui disaster operation whose deep Native Hawaiian roots inform FEMA policies and its decisions.

Just five days after the wildfires raced across Lahaina, cultural practitioners began a 10-day vigil – largely out of public view – to mourn those who perished and to cleanse and ready the land for restoring life, health, and abundance. The Hawaiian moon calendar dictated the timing of the ceremony, and traditional chants were invoked at the request of mourning families.

The vigil set the stage for thousands of federal workers to receive and understand the teachings of Hawai?i’s culture keepers.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency was first to arrive, and brought in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Coast Guard and the U.S. Small Business Administration, to name a few, and their formidable resources. The response operation was buoyed by the American Red Cross and the Salvation Army, both of which managed the feeding and sheltering of thousands of survivors and their pets.

With agencies and charitable organizations looking to the State of Hawai?i, Maui County and cultural advisors to guide decisions on policy, communication and relationship building, partnerships grew. And Hawai?i’s federal visitors began to gain a deeper understanding of how services, funding and economic opportunities would be delivered to a community that was hurting.

“I appreciate FEMA, the government, wanting to hear ... and make some significant decisions to be on Maui in a different way,” said Momi Awo, a retired social worker and cultural practitioner of ho?oponopono, a healing ritual of reconciliation and forgiveness.

“Recognizing the importance of the cultural practices and belief system, the power of healing and being willing to trust the culture here to help people through such a difficult time – it’s made a difference.”



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With the guidance of respected community leaders, FEMA supported and helped to staff a community mobile unit stationed just yards from the entrance to the Lahaina Civic Center gymnasium, where county, state, federal and community organizations offered information and advice about available assistance.

Some survivors preferred the smaller, quieter setting of an office trailer over the cavernous and more intimidating gymnasium. The familiar presence of Hawaiian service providers alongside FEMA staff made it easier to complete applications, ask questions and receive disaster support services in private.

“FEMA’s willingness to serve differently” transformed its reputation among locals as an “obscure, giant federal bureaucracy” into a community partner, said Awo’s husband, Randy Awo, a Hawaiian Homes Maui Commissioner, and co-founder of K?ko?o Leiali?i, the community-developed mobile alternative to the Disaster Recovery Center.

That simple, yet significant, gesture not only gave survivors a more intimate space and refuge to learn about disaster recovery, it built a bridge between Western practices and Native Hawaiians’ cultural way of doing things.

“We continue to rely on and coordinate with our partners, and we’re proud to say our partner list has ballooned over time,” said FEMA’s Regional Administrator Robert Fenton, who leads the agency’s response and recovery operations. “We augment each other’s efforts and we fill in each other’s gaps.”

FEMA created a Cultural Protocol Task Force, with Sylva as its lead. Cultural awareness trainings became mandatory for deployed FEMA staff.

Early in the response, FEMA learned that generations of families in Hawai?i live under one roof and several unrelated people may reside in a single-family home. To address those unique cultural circumstances, the agency adjusted some program requirements to allow multigenerational families to apply individually for assistance.

Blessing ceremonies are now part of the cultural protocol. They are held before federal offices open. They were held when the Army Corps of Engineers completed the temporary campus for the King Kamehameha III Elementary School that was destroyed in the wildfires. They were held before ground was



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broken at the Kilohana group housing site that is preparing to welcome 169 families.

Many paths exist for diverse, community voices to reach the ears of the disaster's leaders.

“Hawaiians don’t always have a voice in what happens on their lands or to their people,” said Mehanaokala Hind, cultural advisor to the Army Corps of Engineers. “This time, they were given a voice to say what was important to them.”



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