

PRESS RELEASE

October 22, 2010

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State Honors Sea Mar Community Health Centers with *Friend of Housing* Award

Tacoma, Wash. — On Oct. 20, Sea Mar Community Health Centers was honored with a 2010 *Friend of Housing* Award for its outstanding programs expanding affordable housing resources for Washington’s low-income residents. Washington State Housing Finance Commission presented the award to Sea Mar CEO Rogelio Riojas before an audience of 350 people.

The Commission presented a total of seven awards during its annual *Friend of Housing* Award Ceremony at the Hotel Murano in Tacoma. This event was part of the *Housing Washington 2010* conference on affordable housing.

“Sea Mar’s commitment to improving the lives of the less fortunate by providing affordable housing to some of the poorest in our society, including farm workers and the homeless, makes them a *Friend of Housing*,” said Kim Herman, executive director of the Commission. “The agency has emerged as a powerful force advocating for housing for its clients and has demonstrated the important link between health care and the need for safe, decent and affordable housing. We are delighted to honor Sea Mar with the statewide recognition it deserves.”

While in recent years, Sea Mar has turned to affordable housing, both urban and rural, and now provides housing and care for farm workers and the elderly, its roots are in community health. Over two decades it has developed centers throughout Washington in 55 locations from Bellingham to Vancouver and Aberdeen to Pasco. These locations provide medical, dental care and behavior health services, as well as homeless outreach programs.

Sea Mar Integrates Housing as a Strategy in its Support Systems

In 1997, Substitute Senate Bill 5668 was approved by the state legislature. This bill would have allowed for construction of substandard seasonal housing for farm-worker families. This temporary, seasonal “housing” would have been without insulation, running water, or bathroom or cooking facilities. Sea Mar joined with other farm worker advocates to convince then Governor Gary Locke to veto SSB 5668.

The veto was controversial because everyone understood that there was a severe shortage of seasonal housing for Washington’s migrant farm workers.

Following this important veto, a farm-worker coalition emerged. The coalition sought affordable, decent housing for the nearly 40,000 farm workers who hand-harvest crops in Washington.

Coalition members felt that farm-workers deserved to live in housing that meets state and federal housing standards. Based on this principle, the farm-worker coalition set out to convince the state to invest in community-based housing.

Sea Mar CEO Rogelio Riojas stated in an op-ed piece: “...community-based housing could provide decent, affordable dwellings that are up to current codes. The units would be centrally located and integrated with the general community...”

The resulting public-education campaign bore fruit and the legislature responded with a commitment of \$8 million per biennium for farm worker housing in the State of Washington’s Housing Trust Fund. Even though the resources have currently dried up, important work continues.

Sea Mar will soon be opening two facilities in the Tri-Cities area that will provide temporary motel-style residency for more than 150 farm workers. These facilities, renovations of existing buildings, mark a decade’s long struggle to overcome reactionary zoning policies and community misunderstanding. However, the pivotal goal of improving living conditions for farm workers is being reached.

In 2009 César Chávez Village, an affordable-housing community for families, opened in Seattle’s South Park neighborhood. The Village has 25 townhouse-style rental apartments with two- to four-bedrooms for families with incomes no greater than 50%

of King County's median income. Five of the apartments are reserved for families transitioning from homelessness. Sea Mar is proud that The Village is named after one of the nation's greatest Latino leaders and founder of the United Farm Workers Union, Cesar Chávez, a family man, environmentalist, and tireless crusader for non-violent social change.

"Not only has Sea Mar been a consistent voice for the "voiceless," it has a 30-year history of providing health, educational and human services to those in need, regardless of ability to pay, and now it is improving the lives of the less fortunate by providing affordable housing," said Rep. Phyllis Gutierrez-Kenney (D-46th District) who nominated Sea Mar for this award.

Washington State Housing Finance Commission is a publicly accountable, self-supporting agency dedicated to increasing housing access and affordability and expanding the availability of quality community services for Washington state residents.

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