

Testimony for HB 4099

Background

After World War II the United States assumed administration of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. The Trust controlled the development of the island economies and international relations. It also gave the United States complete military control within the islands. In 1986 the island nations under the trust Territory were given the option of choosing between becoming a commonwealth of the US or independent nations with special agreements with the United States. Three Island territories chose independence. That independence came attached with a unique treaty, known as “Compact of Free Association” (COFA). COFA agreements were made between the US and The Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI), The Republic of Palau (Palau) and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM).

The Compact agreements allow the citizens from each of these nations to freely migrate, without work permits or visas, to study, live and work in the United States. It also allows the United States to have a strong military presence in the COFA islands in perpetuity. This means no other nation can have any military agreement with the COFA nations.

The US conducted 67 nuclear atmospheric bomb tests in the Marshall Islands – the equivalent of 7200 Hiroshima bombs –spreading far-reaching nuclear fallout. The radiation levels in many of the islands remain extremely high – up to 7600 milligrays (mGy), compared to 10 mGy in cities of the mainland United States. The Marshallese people suffer higher-than-average rates of cancer and other radiation-related diseases. A significant number of migrants continue to suffer from radiogenic diseases, birth defects and chronic illnesses directly tied to U.S. nuclear testing. [\[1\]](#)

COFA citizens not only voluntarily join the US armed services in higher per capita rates than US citizens, they also suffer death rates 4 times higher than US enlistees.

Notably, one of the region’s largest income sources is the Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on the Kwajalein Atoll, Marshall Islands.

COFA residents living in the US pay all taxes: State, Federal and local. Even though their taxes help pay for the programs that assist low-income families, COFA residents are not able to access those services themselves and require

help from their families at home who have already exhausted their meager resources.

Even though COFA residents are legally in the US, they are considered “permanent nonimmigrants” and are not eligible for SSI and other benefits that US Citizens are eligible for.

Turning to the importance of HB 4099, COFA families and students coming to the US they strongly desire a higher education. They realize that in order to provide a firm base for their future of living freely in the US, as the Compact promises, COFA families and students have come to realize that a College degree becomes a necessity in order to realize their dreams. Yet because of the extreme barriers they face are so great, very few are able to achieve this goal. For most, the burden of paying out of state tuition rates simply presents to high a lift. Some are fortunate and with the assistance of special grants and their families back home, they are able to achieve their goal, but most find this to high of a reach. Unlike US students they are not eligible for student loans, and their families back home can only offer limited financial assistance. Most COFA families living in their home Islands have extremely meager incomes compared to US families as the wage rate is very low at \$2.50 per hour or less. Students who do manage to come to the US for higher education typically rely on small grants from their home country. The grants most often are limited in both time and dollar amount, and insufficient to cover the additional burden of out- of- state tuition. Tragically many are forced to drop out and go into the job market to continue to live in the US. The ones that do finish are fortunate and are to be honored because they have to work 30 to 40 hours per week.

HB 4099 will go a long way of making the dream of getting a higher education achievable for many more of our the COFA Pacific Islanders that the US has had such a long and historically unique relationship. I ask for your support for HB 4099.

Loyd Henion

COFA Alliance National Network (CANN)

[\[1\]](#) Simon, Steven L. et al. “RADIATION DOSES AND CANCER RISKS IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS ASSOCIATED WITH EXPOSURE TO

RADIOACTIVE FALLOUT FROM BIKINI AND ENEWETAK NUCLEAR WEAPONS TESTS: SUMMARY.” *Health physics* 99.2 (2010): 105–123. PMC. Web. 4 Feb. 2015.