



February 5, 2021

RE: SB 553: In-state tuition for 1<sup>st</sup>-year COFA students, recently arrived refugees, SIV holders

Chair Dembrow, Vice-Chair Thomsen and Members of the Senate Committee on Education:

CANN and Oregon's three faith-based refugee resettlement organizations, strongly encourage passage of SB 553. This bill will give first-year COFA students, and recently-arrived refugees and SIV holders, an opportunity to reach their educational goals. It will provide an easier path to go to college by allowing them to receive in-state public college and university tuition rates.

COFA students in Oregon universities now have family incomes at poverty levels so low that almost none are able to attend a college/university without grants or scholarships. The average cost of tuition plus fees per year for a COFA student attending an Oregon regional public university is about \$22,298 compared to in-state tuition plus fees of \$9,629. These figures do not include room and board which increases the cost to about \$30,525. If they attend the larger institutions (i.e. U of O, OSU or PSU), the average cost per year is even greater about \$51,000. This level of outlays is an unattainable reach for the vast majority of COFA students and their families. Even in-state tuition rates are still a challenge but are far more realistic for COFA students to reach their dream of a higher education.

Over 90% of COFA island students enrolled in an Oregon university work between 20 to 40 hours per week to support themselves and pursue the college goals. Yet, many have to drop out as this can be a struggle, even with grants, when their income is split to supplement their livelihood and pay for college; especially considering the limitations to grants, scholarship and financial assistance.

Senate bill 553 will provide an opportunity for approximately 20 COFA high school graduates, annually, the ability to enroll in an Oregon college or university and pay in-state tuition costs. By lowering costs and providing an opportunity to access higher education, Oregon will help ensure that more COFA students and their families have the ability to achieve career pathways, increasing incomes, and strengthening Oregon's economy.

Refugees are individuals who are granted refugee status for admission to the United States by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). SIV (Special Immigrant Visa) holders are individuals that served as interpreters and translators alongside our military in Iraq and Afghanistan. As with refugees, the USCIS grants SIV holders admission to the United States. Refugees and SIV holders are legal immigrants to the US, they are on a pathway to citizenship, and they are the most screened and vetted individuals to be granted admission to our country. All refugees and SIV holders are screened by the National Counterterrorism Center/Intelligence Community, the FBI, The Dept. of Homeland Security, and the State Dept. These screenings include extensive background checks, fingerprint screenings, and interviews with specially trained USCIS officers. This process typically takes 6-10 years before families are allowed to resettle.

Our organizations have been resettling, supporting and advocating for refugees and SIV holders in Oregon for decades. This year, Oregon expects to welcome roughly 500 refugees and SIV holders. We estimate that fewer than 40 of these individuals are going to seek enrollment at Oregon's universities within their first year of arrival. This bill's passage, providing in-state tuition eligibility for these individuals, will ensure that they have the opportunity to continue rebuilding their lives, learning the necessary knowledge and skills to increase employment opportunities, and make our state's economy stronger.

We extend our deepest gratitude for your help and your support of SB 553.

Sincerely,

COFA Alliance National Network (CANN) (lhenion@CANN.US), (kmiller@CANN.US),  
(bmoses@CANN.US), (fsmporland@gmail.com), (danito@CANN.US)

EMO (bconroy@emoregon.org)

Catholic Charities of Oregon (kkelley@ccoregon.org)

Lutheran Community Services NW (sansary@lcsnw.org)

Unite Oregon (sushma@uniteoregon.org)

IRCO and Pacific Islander and Asian Family Center (PIAFC) (CoiV@irco.org)