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On Behalf Of:
Committee: Senate Committee On Human Services
Measure: SB856

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COFA residents: Who are they and what are they doing here? Oh, I see they are from three independent countries that have existed since 1986 in the North Pacific. I also see that the US liberated them from the Japanese in WW II and that we now have treaties, known as the Compact of Free Association. I see that we tested 67 nuclear bombs in the Marshall Islands and 4 of their Atolls remain highly radiated and unsafe for habitation. I see we have a very important military base in RMI. I see their people join the US military. And I see that their air, land and sea space is controlled by the US in perpetuity. It turns out that our military interests to these island nations is largely because of their location in the Pacific. Yes, they are strategically important to the defense of the free world, so it's understandable that this provision was put into the treaty. And, within the terms of the treaty, the US granted them the right to come live in the US as long as they wish. These rights were granted them by the terms of a unique treaty unlike any we have with any other country. By the terms of the treaty, they do not even need visas, just I-94 forms to identify their legal presence in the US. Why then, in 1996, were basic social safety net benefits taken from them under an act of Congress known as the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)? It turns out no one today has a good answer for that. This issue however is now being addressed under the negotiations in progress for the third COFA treaty (COFA III). Still for some 27 years the COFA people who came to the US were not living here Freely as the COFA treaty promises. They became invisible, forgotten. Indeed, COFA I termed the people "non-Immigrants". They are not even immigrants but yet, are here legally. What a confusing designation. After PRWORA, this evolved to mean that they are not eligible for Safety Net benefits such as Medicaid or SNAP, as are legal immigrants (Green Card holders) after living in the US for 5 years.

But the problems with their non-Immigrant alien status wasn't limited to the DL issue. It continued by their being denied Medicaid and Dental coverage. Again, CANN brought these issues to the Oregon Legislature, and they responded by passing bills to correct these issues. The invisible COFA citizens were becoming more visible, at least in Oregon. Indeed, the Oregon Premium Assistance program provided a template that was used to reinstate Medicaid for them at the federal level, taking away financial responsibility from Oregonians.

CANN has as its core mission issues that belie the spirit of the treaty. Much of this has been caused by the COFA residents' designation as non-immigrants. Addressing the ineligibility for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) for COFA citizens has been on the agenda for CANN since the beginning. However, CANN decided it wise to address each issue one at time. SB 856, the COFA SNAP bill, is brought before the legislature to once again address the question of who are the COFA residents living among us and how they should be treated. For example, it is hard to explain why within the same COFA family only children born in the US are eligible for SNAP benefits. SB 856 puts the bright spotlight on their plight for equal treatment and thus addresses the invisibility issue head on. The 27 years of limbo that resulted in this mistreatment, is a limbo living condition they have had to face far too long. By passing SB 856, we can repair the problem of the COFA residents being ineligible for SNAP. We must start at the state level first, then, through passage of the bill, leverage it to the federal level where it belongs. The bill is necessary to make these invisible people visible. Please Pass SB856.

With appreciation,
COFA Alliance National Network