

Testimony on SCR 16-COFA Resolution to restore benefits

Chair Lieber, Vice Chair Knopp and Committee members,

It's been a long struggle to achieve full restoration of benefits to the COFA residents living in Oregon and the United States. In 201 the COFA Alliance National Network (CANN) was founded to address this restoration process. Here is the story that generated the need for an advocate organization: Local Salem COFA residents were alarmed when they were told they no longer were eligible for full term driver's licenses and would, in the future, have to renew their license every year. At this point, the leaders of the Oregon Marshallese Community in Salem contacted the Salem Mayor's office and the Mayor's representative helped to organize a meeting in the basement of a church that included representatives from the Oregon Dept. of Motor vehicles, the Dept. of Homeland Security, and the local law enforcement officers. Many COFA attendees were present to tell their stories. With just one year driver's cards, they found getting housing, bank accounts, and even employment difficult as landlords, bankers, and employers couldn't understand who 'these people' were as they didn't have green cards as did 'other immigrants'. In fact, the COFA citizens told the government officials, COFA residents are classified as non-immigrants. Founding members of CANN were there that evening and became determined to focus on changing this great injustice. The Pacific Islanders present related that they gave their land, air, sea space, and people for the defense of the US. Furthermore, the area of the Pacific Ocean that is inhabited by these three countries was irradiated with 67 nuclear devices detonated in the Marshall Islands in the 1950's. As a result, serious health issues have arisen and become endemic throughout the area. This driver's license restriction, they said, seemed to totally disregard their sacrifices, ignoring the medical issues caused by the US bomb testing in the Marshall islands. Finally, it was in direct contradiction to the spirit of the Compact of Free Association Treaty which was supposed to welcome their coming to permanently work, study and live in the US, "freely". They openly questioned what the US meant in the treaty by "free", when it was becoming impossible for them to exist and compete for their future wellbeing in the US. COFA citizens did not have an equal opportunity for success, even with other immigrants.

Once CANN explained to the Oregon legislature that COFA residents were legally here by way of a unique treaty with the US and they paid the same

taxes as US citizens and their young men and women joined the US armed services in percentages higher than any state, the legislature enthusiastically remedied this glaring injustice with a unanimous yes vote on HB 2017. While a full-term driver's license did make their identity clearer as legal residents and reduce some of the discriminatory practices, there was still much work to be done to restore their ability to live in Oregon and the US 'freely' as the *Compact of Free Association treaty* promised.

In 1996, the US Congress passed the Personal Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PWORA), referred to as the Welfare Reform Act. While the act was generally aimed at welfare benefits being limited to those that were "deserving", somehow a provision was added that excluded COFA residents from Medicaid, food stamps and other safety net benefits altogether. This, of course, was in direct opposition to the spirit and intention of the COFA treaty. To be sure, although there were a few attempts to bring this up at the federal level, there wasn't enough organized effort to get a movement started to legislatively restore the benefits they once had.

After the Oregon legislators fixed the driver's license inequity, CANN was determined to address other inequities COFA residents in Oregon were experiencing, bill by bill, year by year. CANN first turned to Medicaid since COFA residents' only medical care came from the emergency departments of the local hospitals when it was often too late to address illnesses that had not been attended to sooner. HB 4071 was unanimously passed in 2016 as Oregon became the first state to provide a state level Medicaid-like "COFA Premium Assistance Program", a measure that piggybacked onto the Affordable Care Act. CANN's slogan was "If the Federal government can't, CANN can" with the help and understanding of Oregon legislators.

CANN was also starting to work with federal legislators at the same time to get Medicaid for COFA citizens at the federal level. This was done with Senator Wyden's and Senator Hirono's help by attaching a rider to the Covid Relief bill in 2019. Also in 2021, CANN sponsored, and the legislature passed, SB 553 which gave COFA students in-state tuition making higher education much more feasible for impoverished COFA students and their families. Earlier in 2017 HB 2594 gave COFA residents the opportunity to become law enforcement agents at the local and state levels and last year SB 1538 gave COFA residents dental coverage.

Now, after 10 years, there is still equity work to be done for them. While the Oregon legislature has become the model for other states and the US Congress, it seems there is always a Safety Net piece that is missing (eg. SNAP). With SCR 16 CANN has taken up Senator Manning's suggestion, that is to enact legislation that ensures that COFA residents receive the same constellation of Safety Net (SN) benefits that US citizens residing in Oregon receive.

CANN believes that SCR 16 is the forerunner for a full restoration of benefits COFA residents had before passage of PWORA. CANN believes that by Oregon's legislature taking the lead other states and, finally, federal statutes will follow.

A big shout out is in order, to several legislators who became strong supporters of COFA issues, some who are no longer in the legislature. While tempted to mention names its best to defer as the list is long. CANN wants them to know that they have played crucial roles in making the lives of COFA residents both freer and more hopeful for the future. Your yes vote on SCR 16 will continue the legacy of Oregon's legislature in restoring COFA citizen's to justice.

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