

March 21, 2025

Good afternoon, Chair Patterson, Vice Chair Hayden, and esteemed Committee members,

Thank you for this opportunity to come before you and share my experience and why I support SB442.

As an Oregon Health Plan Assister, I have had the privilege of working closely with citizens from the Compact of Free Association (COFA) nations. These individuals contribute significantly to our communities, enriching our state with their diverse cultures, hard work, and dedication. Senate Bill 442 continues Oregon's legacy of justice and fairness by ensuring that COFA citizens receive the support and recognition they deserve, per newly signed COFA agreement effective July of 2024.

The Compact of Free Association (COFA) is an agreement from 1986 between the United States and three Pacific island nations: the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Palau. This agreement allows citizens from these countries to live, work, and study in the U.S. without needing a visa. It also lets them receive certain benefits from the U.S. government, like healthcare coverage, and social services such as SNAP food assistance, TANF help for families and SSI income support.

Due to these unique treaties, COFA people in Oregon face particular challenges navigating systems, such as barriers to healthcare and essential social services. Although the treaties allow COFA citizens to enter the U.S. as nonimmigrants without visas, they are often mistakenly grouped with other immigrant populations. This misunderstanding creates even greater gaps in services, stemming from a lack of awareness about their unique immigration status.

In my role, I have witnessed firsthand the struggles COFA Oregon residents endure to access healthcare. I remember assisting a COFA person who had been battling a chronic illness without adequate medical support and a lack of understanding from the medical institution on how to help them navigate support.

Through the Oregon Health Plan, we were able to provide the necessary care. Although we were eventually able to secure necessary care through the OHP, this experience clearly highlighted the urgent need for more comprehensive support, ongoing education, and collaboration regarding COFA residents' unique nonimmigrant status. Greater awareness and training are essential to ensuring these residents consistently receive the care and resources they deserve, which a staffed office can provide.

Supporting Senate Bill 442 is not just about providing a space; it is about empowering our COFA people to advocate for their own community. By having COFA people who can speak the language and understand the unique challenges faced by their peers, we ensure that their voices are heard, and their needs are met. This bill honors the contributions of our COFA neighbors and ensures they are treated with the dignity and respect they deserve.

Senate Bill 442 represents a crucial step towards a more just and equitable Oregon, where every resident has the opportunity to thrive. I urge you to support Senate Bill 442 and help us continue to build a state that values justice, fairness, and the well-being of all its citizens.

By passing Senate Bill 442, which establishes a dedicated COFA Office, we can effectively address disparities and streamline system bottlenecks that currently hinder access to vital services. This bill reaffirms Oregon's commitment to fostering healthy residents who meaningfully contribute to the vibrancy of our communities and workforce. COFA residents in Oregon actively participate in their communities by paying taxes, leading organizations, volunteering in schools, and fulfilling important civic responsibilities. Senate Bill 442 will provide COFA residents with essential resources to lead healthy, secure, and fulfilling lives, further strengthening the social and economic fabric of our state.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

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