

March 26, 2025

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

My name is A.W. Augustine, and I am from the island nation of Palau, one of the countries that have a Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreement with the United States. The other island nations included in this agreement are the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) and the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM).

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 food assistance (SNAP), cash help for families (TANF), and income support (SSI), without having to wait.

I have lived in Oregon for over 40 years and currently reside in Multnomah County. Throughout my time here, I've served as an active leader in my community, Palauan organization, Rengelekel Belau. Additionally, I've remained deeply involved with my church and participated in various civic engagements within my county and state. I share this, because many of my fellow COFA residents of Oregon are actively engaged in our state and lead efforts whether it is in their children's school, church, community, etc.

Yet our COFA community members continue to struggle with accessing healthcare and other essential social services due to numerous barriers and challenges. Many individuals remain unaware of available resources, let alone how to navigate or apply for them. Consequently, they often depend solely on emergency rooms for healthcare, face persistent food insecurity, and struggle to afford rent and necessary medications. The issue goes beyond language barriers; significant cultural differences, especially between island healthcare practices and the American healthcare system, create additional complexity. Similar challenges affect access to SNAP benefits and other critical services, including transportation to medical appointments or hospitals.

Establishing a shared COFA office will be significant in ensuring that all COFA citizens in Oregon can successfully access the resources and benefits they are now eligible for. For the past 15 years, Oregon has led the way in recognizing and addressing the injustices faced by COFA residents living in Oregon. These legislative actions acknowledge the devastating impacts of nuclear testing and ongoing military usage of the islands as well as recognize the sacrifices made by COFA citizens who have served in the U.S. military to protect the freedoms we all cherish.

I understand that there are non-profits receiving funding to support COFA people in Oregon, but their reach to the Palauan community is limited and there are so many people who need support. Many individuals remain unaware of available resources, let alone how to navigate or apply for them. They often depend solely on emergency rooms for healthcare, and struggle to afford the necessary medications and other social support services.

COFA residents in Oregon actively enrich our state—by paying taxes, leading community organizations, volunteering in local schools, and fulfilling essential civic responsibilities. Establishing a shared COFA office is critical to ensuring these community members can fully access the benefits and resources to which they are now entitled, enabling them to lead healthy, secure, and fulfilling lives.

I strongly urge you to support Senate Bill 442 and stand with those who have contributed greatly to our shared history, and whose success will further strengthen the social and economic fabric of Oregon's future.

Ko meral mesulang, which is thank you very much in Palauan language. Your consideration and support for this bill is greatly appreciated.

With respect and gratitude,

A.W. Augustine
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