

Chairman Barker and members of the Judiciary Committee,

It is a real pleasure to be here today and have the opportunity to lend my voice to HB 2517. As Mr. Baum and Mr. Ogo have stated, HB 2517 seeks to restore a fair playing field with respect to Driver's License requirements for COFA nation citizens residing in Oregon. There is a reason why the United States has historically granted a "Free Association" status to this unique set of Island countries. There has been and continues to be a quid pro quo. Our security depends on their real estate and they are dependent on our defense systems.

Let me digress a little bit to tell you how I have become so intimately involved with the concerns and issues of the Marshallese people, who represent a significant number of the COFA residents in Oregon. In fact their children are the second largest minority group in the Salem/Kaiser school district.

Four years ago I was advertising for part time home care for my 92 year old mother who still resides on our family farm in Jefferson, Oregon. My wife, who is a nurse, and I interviewed Camilla Tarkwon and despite a slight language barrier we decided to hire her. It was the best decision we ever made. Camilla is still with us and now, along with one of her relatives, lives in the home. I have found Camilla to be the matriarch to nearly the entire Marshallese population in Oregon. She seems to be related to everyone. That's understandable considering there are less than 100,000 Marshallese on the planet. That's the population of Salem 24 years ago. Through Camilla, I have met the majority of the Marshallese in Salem, Eugene, and all of them in Albany and Corvallis. I have also met the Ambassador to the United States, Mr. Charles Paul; the Speaker of the House, Mr. Donald Capelle; and the former President, Mr. Jurelang Zedkaia. Government officials visit the states that have high numbers of their people living in the US on a permanent basis. On two occasions members of this body have graciously taken time to show the Marshallese government officials through our magnificent capitol. I want to officially thank Representative Brian Clem and Senator Arnie Roblan for doing so.

I have attended numerous Birthday parties and even funerals. They have special, community-wide Birthday parties for their children when they turn one year old. As many as 300 people in the community for miles around attend as this is an occasion for a very festive event with island dancing, music and lots of food. I am always an honored guest and asked to speak. This makes me feel very humbled. The reason they have the biggest birthday party at one year is that infant mortality is so high that the one year mark is real cause for celebration.

So please excuse me for my digression but just let me say I will be eternally grateful to the Marshallese people for their kindness to my mother and their deep and ongoing sacrifice they have given to our country. And they, along with the two other COFA nations deserve better than to be treated as alien visitors. They should not be

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a small deal to these folks. It's more than a nuisance, it's a yearly burden both in terms of money and time to them and their employers. When we Americans visit or live in the COFA nations we are not burdened in this way. With respect to driver's licenses, because of COFA, we are treated the same as if we were citizens of their country. All in all we are truly blessed by these gentle and gracious islanders living and working among us. They are among the world's finest care givers and compliant and dedicated workers. Just ask Tyson Chicken in Arkansas who have made it a habit to hire the Marshallese.

Finally, we are very grateful that this bill has bipartisan support. We thank Representative Brian Clem and Representative Viki Berger for the time and effort they have given to understanding the reasons for this bill and their willingness to be co-sponsors.

Loyd Henion  
583 NE South Nebergall Loop  
Albany, Oregon  
[henion@conced.net](mailto:henion@conced.net)  
541-619-8861