

# Statement in Support of HB 4099

COFA Alliance Network  
Catholic Charities of Oregon  
Lutheran Community Services Northwest  
Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon

February 7, 2020

Chair Doherty, Vice-Chairs Alonso Leon and Helt, and Members of the Committee,

COFA Alliance Network (CANN) and Oregon's three refugee resettlement organizations strongly encourage passage of HB 4099. This bill will give first-year Compact of Free Association (COFA) students and recently-arrived refugees and Special Immigrant Visa (SIV) holders an opportunity to reach their educational goals by making them eligible for in-state public college and university tuition rates.

COFA students in Oregon universities now have family incomes at poverty levels so low that almost none are able to attend a college/university without grants or scholarships. The average cost of tuition per year for a COFA student attending an Oregon regional public university is about \$21,885, not including room and board which increases the cost to about \$30,525. If they attend the larger institutions (i.e. U of O, OSU or PSU), the average cost per year is about \$48,400. That is an unattainable reach for COFA families, and even with in-state tuition higher education is unfortunately a challenge for most families.

Over 90% of COFA island students enrolled in an Oregon university work between 20 to 40 hours per week to support themselves and pursue the college goals. Yet, many have to drop out as this can be a struggle, even with grants, when their income is split to supplement their livelihood and pay for college; especially considering the limitations to grants, scholarship and financial assistance.

House Bill 4099 will provide an opportunity every year for roughly 20 COFA high school graduates to pay in-state tuition rates. By lowering costs and providing an opportunity to access higher education, Oregon will help ensure that more COFA students and their families have the possibility to access career pathways, increase household incomes and strengthen Oregon's economy.

House Bill 4099 will also ensure recently arrived refugees and SIV holders have the opportunity to continue rebuilding their lives.

Refugees are individuals who are granted refugee status for admission to the United States by the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS). SIV (Special Immigrant Visa)

holders are individuals that served as interpreters and translators alongside our military in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Refugees and SIV holders are legal immigrants to the US, they are on a pathway to citizenship, and they are the most screened and vetted individuals to be granted admission to our country. All refugees and SIV holders are screened by the National Counterterrorism Center/Intelligence Community, the FBI, The Department of Homeland Security, and the State Department. These screenings include extensive background checks, fingerprint screenings, and interviews with specially trained USCIS officers. This process typically takes six to ten years before families are allowed to resettle.

Catholic Charities of Oregon, Lutheran Community Services Northwest, and Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon have been resettling refugees and SIV holders, through a partnership with the federal government, since the 1940's. This year, Oregon expects to roughly 500 refugees and SIV holders. We estimate that 20 of these individuals are going to seek enrollment at Oregon's universities within their first year of arrival.

By enabling recently arrived refugees and SIV holders to attend Oregon's colleges and universities at in-state tuition rates, HB 4099 will enable these individuals the opportunity to obtain the necessary knowledge and skills to increase employment opportunities, making our state's economy stronger. Just as importantly, the provisions in HB 4099 supporting recently arrived refugees and SIV holders are a testament to Oregon values of solidarity, compassion and fairness, proclaiming that when our state welcomes those forced to flee persecution and violence, we welcome these newest Oregonians fully.

We extend our deepest gratitude for your help and support for HB 4099.

Sincerely,

Loyd Henion, Board Member, COFA Alliance National Network

*lhenion@cann.us*

Salah Ansary, Senior District Director, Lutheran Community Services Northwest

*sansary@lcsnw.org*

Matthew Westerbeck, Director of Refugee Services, Catholic Charities of Oregon

*mwesterbeck@ccoregon.org*

Britt Conroy, Public Policy Director, Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon

*bconroy@emoregon.org*