



House Committee on Education
February 10, 2020

Re: HB 4099

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

On behalf of the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO), I am writing to express our strong support for House Bill 4099, which would qualify citizens of nations with Compact of Free Association agreements, special immigrant visa holders, and refugees for an exemption from nonresident tuition and fees at public universities and make them eligible for state and university scholarships and other state financial aid. This legislation also includes refugees and special immigrant visa holders who have not established residency in any other U.S. state. Increasing higher education opportunities is a key part of APANO's education justice work, and HB 4099 will help do exactly that.

As an organization dedicated to uniting Asian and Pacific Islanders for social change, we partner with the COFA Alliance National Network (CANN) and Micronesian Islander Community of Oregon (MIC) to support their work as they lead organizing and advocacy within these communities. Alongside these partners, APANO works for the equitable treatment and well-being of COFA citizens in Oregon and across the nation.

For background, three Micronesian nations—the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands—have formed agreements under the Compact of Free Association (COFA) that provides the right for citizens of COFA nations to live, work and study in the United States without undergoing the immigration process.¹ In Oregon, our Pacific Islander communities are growing rapidly, especially our Micronesian Islander communities. Many have come to Oregon in response to the climate crisis, as rising sea levels are devastating their home islands. Others have come as a result of the fallout from U.S. nuclear testing and occupation.

However, when moving to the U.S., COFA citizens face enormous challenges. Despite the assurances of the COFA agreements, once in the U.S., COFA citizens are excluded from many essential federal services and programs due to their residency status. Because of this barrier,

¹ We refer to “COFA citizens” to clarify the relationship that the U.S. has formed with the three Freely Associated States: the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands. The Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreements with these three nations establishes a unique “migrant” status that authorizes their citizens to enter the U.S. to live, work, and study indefinitely during the term of the COFA agreements, although it does not allow a pathway to permanent residency or citizenship. Other nations in Micronesia do not have such agreements with the U.S. Therefore we use the term “COFA citizens” to distinguish this special status for citizens of the COFA states, as compared to the status of citizens from other nations in Micronesia and from U.S. citizens or immigrants with origins in the three COFA nations. We emphasize that among—and within—the COFA nations, there is a diversity of culture, identity, and experiences, and COFA citizens should not be considered a single monolithic community.



those seeking educational opportunities in the U.S. are barred from receiving federal loans, and are only eligible for Pell Grants, even after they have lived in the U.S. for years. This is especially troubling as many COFA citizens live under 138% of the Federal Poverty Level and cannot afford the out-of-state tuition and fees of Oregon's public universities. At several state universities, nonresident tuition costs thousands or even tens of thousands dollars more than it does for residents.

Data on higher education for citizens of the Federated States of Micronesia shows that there are serious barriers to college completion. Of the approximately 24,000 citizens of the Federated States of Micronesia who moved to the US, more than 1 in 4 (6,447) moved for educational opportunity. But for those who moved to the US with this goal, a majority of them do not complete a degree.² We should address this challenge by making college more affordable as soon as COFA citizens come to Oregon.

APANO also believes that making college more affordable for refugees and special immigrant visa holders is another important part of education justice. For these newcomers to our state, increasing college affordability right away will help them succeed in their new homes. We also note that while we strongly support this bill, we hope that the Legislature will consider extending these benefits to community college students in the future, since many COFA citizens first attend community college because of its greater affordability.

HB 4099 would help remove barriers that COFA citizens, refugees, and special immigrant visa holders face in Oregon. It is an important step to ensure that students and those with aspirations for higher education can better afford to achieve this dream. Thank you for your consideration of this measure, and we respectfully urge you to vote yes on HB 4099.

Sincerely,
Jenny Lee, Advocacy Director
APANO

² Virginia Luka, "Momes er a Micronesia: Where are my people in higher education?" Adapted from F.X. Hazel and M.J. Levin, "Survey of Federated States of Micronesian Migrants in the United States Including Guam and the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands," 2012.