

March 8, 2021

Senate Health Care Committee - Senate Bill 706

Alii and Good afternoon Committee Chair Patterson, Vice Chair Knopp, and Members of the Senate Health Care Committee,

My name is Bennie Moses-Mesubed, and from the island of Palau and serve as the Vice President of the COFA Alliance National Network (CANN), and I also reside in La Grande, Eastern Oregon. Thank you for this opportunity to testify in support of Senate Bill 706, the COFA Medicaid Outreach bill.

The Compact of Free Association, also known as COFA or “the Compact”, is a unique treaty between the United States and the Republic of Palau, Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Federated States of Micronesia that was created when these islands were given an opportunity to establish a political identity outside of being a Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands.

The unique COFA agreement has enabled the U.S. Military to occupy the COFA islands land, air and sea territories since post World War 2. The COFA agreement is partially established as compensation for the loss of life, health, land, and resources due to the atomic nuclear testing and ballistic missile exercises that displaced entire island communities, damaged the environment, devastated our peoples’ health and our island economies. COFA citizens have a legal right to freely enter, live and legally work in the US and have access to the same basic services as US citizens, including healthcare and Medicaid. The official legal document that COFA citizens use is called the I-94.

In return, the U.S. has sole access and a substantial amount of military power over these islands that are considered of important strategic value. As already mentioned, COFA citizens have given up their lives serving in the US military at higher rates per capita than US citizens. Due to a “federal oversight” in Medicaid policy over 25 years ago, COFA citizens residing in the US have not been able to access Medicaid. Even our Veterans weren’t able to access Medicaid for all these years.

The promises of the Compact have not always been honored and our COFA people still face many hurdles every day. Despite the assurances of the Compact, we are faced with many challenges, such as being immediately excluded from many essential state and federal social services including quality healthcare. These reasons are why the restoration of Medicaid to COFA citizens is an overdue, long awaited victory for our people, as long as they are effectively able to access it.

Senate Bill 706 requests 2 multilingual, multicultural FTEs for the Oregon Health Authority (OHA). It also requests a \$300,000 grant to an organization that has experience in reaching and supporting the Medicaid eligible COFA citizens in their household and at other community locations in order to effectively complete the Medicaid application process. These two components are absolutely essential to ensuring that all eligible COFA citizens are enrolled in Medicaid.

It also is critical that OHA employ culturally and linguistically qualified staff with knowledge, experience and understanding of our community and the historical barriers they faced in order

to effectively coordinate and administer the Medicaid outreach program. Additionally, the culturally based organization(s) receiving the grant will and should play an essential role in reaching COFA citizens in their own household environments and ensure the highest level of qualified enrollees for the new federally funded Medicaid program. We are happy to also share that Pacific Source, one of the largest CCOs in the state of Oregon, as well as EIGHT other CCOs have submitted their written testimony in support of this bill and the outreach and enrollment concepts it puts forth.

I have worked on the ground supporting Oregonians and especially our COFA community members impacted by COVID19 and am very grateful for OHAs approach to create intentional partnerships with culturally based organizations knowing that because of health disparities and barriers our community members often struggle navigating through the system. There are also a lack of trust and understanding due to past historical barriers, invalidation and challenges that often add a sense of not belonging or deserving of services and resources. In addition, there are six different languages spoken by COFA citizens and these language barriers and cultural challenges/understandings create major hurdles in the healthcare enrollment process. Having been an advocate, I have often learned that a simple explanation in how the American Health system works from those who are familiar with it, requires a more extensive familiarity with COFA people which includes building trust and a developing relationship that is based on understanding the history and cultural nuances, and a genuine caring for the COFA people getting their basic needs met.

My family recently experienced the impact of COVID19 as many of our community members have in these past months and years. And because of the extensive impact it had on my family, we are still going through doctors' visits, physical therapy, treatments, testing's and more. I have often heard from our doctors, on how happy they are that we are coming to all our appointments, and that many of our community members are not showing up to theirs. As I look at the costs and many other challenges that our COFA communities have and continue to face every day, especially not having access to quality health insurance, I realize that our community members are not missing their appointments because they want to. It is because they are having to choose between their health and affording a place to live or food on the table. That because they struggle with sharing what is really going on with their health due to language barriers, do not have proper health insurance, and are not able to fully articulate their own needs; that because they have been shamed before because of the barriers they face, that trauma is still so apparent that it requires an advocate who knows and understands them or from their own community to help them build trust in the system, understand that they too deserve quality health care as well as the support and resources available to most people.

Without this bill, there will be many eligible persons that will not receive any medical services. CANN estimates as many as 30 to 50 percent of most COFA citizens have never heard of Medicaid. Not knowing what Medicaid is will make it difficult, if not impossible, for many COFA citizens to negotiate the application and enrollment processes. SB 706 will solve these problems and supports larger Oregon state initiatives around healthcare equity for all Oregonians.

I would like to express my deepest appreciation for this time and also acknowledge your leadership in making this bill a priority for consideration.

Ko meral mesulang which means Thank you very much in my native Palauan language.