



**Mark Meek**  
**State Senator**  
**District 20**

February 27, 2023

**TO:** Senate Committee on Human Services

**FROM:** Sen. Mark Meek

**RE:** Support for SB 856

**Chair Gelser Blouin, Vice-Chair Robinson and Members of the Committee,**

I am writing today to express my strong support for SB 856, which would allow residents covered under the Compact of Free Association (COFA) to access federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits. Thank you for the opportunity to bring this bill forward and to share the importance of this issue.

A little background: The COFA is a treaty first established in 1980 and signed into US law in 1986 between the United States and three Pacific Island nations: The Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Republic of Palau. There were a couple major reasons for the signing of the treaty: 1) To compensate for the negative impacts of nuclear weapons testing between 1946-1958 – during the height of the Cold War – that took place on the Marshall Islands, as well as Bikini and Enewetak Atolls; and 2) Mutual strategic interests for military defense and national security for the three member nations as well as the United States.

The COFA treaty allows citizens of these three nations to – without needing a visa – freely enter and live in the United States, work in the United States, and even serve in our armed forces. In fact, many of the people covered under the COFA treaty who live here in Oregon are military veterans or currently serve in active duty. We owe a debt of gratitude for their service to our country.

The COFA treaty is also supposed to allow access certain federal benefits (such as SNAP), and in fact it did for the first decade it was in effect. Despite this fact, and despite the original treaty, COFA residents are currently ineligible for federal SNAP benefits, even though they pay taxes, contribute to our economy, and serve in our military. This is due to a provision in the 1996 federal welfare reform law (Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act of 1996) that inadvertently excluded COFA residents from receiving SNAP benefits. This exclusion has had a devastating impact on low-income COFA residents living here in Oregon, who often struggle to afford basic necessities like food and housing. Too many COFA families live in poverty and face food insecurity, which can have serious long-term consequences for their health and well-being.

SB 856 would correct this injustice by allowing COFA residents to access federal SNAP benefits in Oregon, as the COFA treaty originally stated. This would provide much-needed support to many families in Oregon who are currently living in poverty and struggling to make ends meet.

Furthermore, passing this legislation would also send a powerful message that Oregon values the contributions of COFA residents to our community and to our country. By extending SNAP benefits to COFA residents, we can help ensure that they have access to the resources they need to thrive and build a better future for themselves and their families.

In conclusion, I urge the committee to support SB 856 and move this bill along to Joint Ways & Means. SB 856 will honor the spirit and original intent of the COFA treaty and correct a longstanding injustice. Thank you for your attention to this important issue.

**Sincerely,**



**Mark Meek**  
**State Senator**  
**District 20 (*Oregon City, Gladstone, Happy Valley*)**