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RE: Support for SB 442, the COFA Shared Services Office meets the Governor's priorities

Senator Lieber, Representative Sanchez and members of the Joint Ways and Means Committee

I am writing to express my strong support for Senate Bill 442, which seeks to establish the COFA Shared Services Office to assist citizens of the Compact of Free Association (COFA) nations in accessing essential services and benefits in Oregon. This legislation represents a vital step toward ensuring that COFA citizens—who live, work, and contribute to our communities—receive the support they need to thrive. Moreover, this bill, as affirmed by the written and oral testimony of the Governor's appointed committee on Asian and Pacific Affairs (OCAPIA), is perfectly aligned with the Governor's priorities and should be included in the budgets of both OHA and ODHS. Housing is a human right and a racial justice issue. When it comes to housing, I can count on one hand the number of COFA residents that own their own home. Many are actually homeless and go from COFA family to COFA family to sleep on their couches or floors. Most of the time, their apartments are already over capacity, and the homeless must move again. Many of these do what they can to survive but still don't have an address. When it comes to mental health, young COFA residents have among the highest suicide rates. Emergency rooms are still the primary medical service as they really don't understand how to access what is available to them.

COFA citizens, including those from the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of Palau, have a unique relationship with the United States. Despite their significant contributions to our workforce, economy, and culture, they often face challenges in accessing critical services such as healthcare, housing assistance, employment resources, and legal support. SB 442 directly addresses these disparities by creating a centralized office dedicated to assisting COFA citizens in navigating the complex landscape of federal, state, and local programs.

The COFA Shared Services Office will:

- Provide targeted assistance for COFA citizens to apply for and access essential benefits, including healthcare, food assistance, and housing support.
- Conduct outreach efforts to ensure that COFA citizens are aware of the services available to them.
- Offer grants to community organizations that specialize in culturally specific services, ensuring that aid is delivered in an accessible and effective manner.
- Enhance healthcare access by incentivizing the recruitment and retention of traditional health workers who understand the unique needs of COFA citizens.
- Develop an informational website in the languages spoken by COFA citizens to promote accessibility and awareness.

- Help ensure that all COFA language groups are contacted and informed about what they are eligible for and be helped with the application process.
- The Office will submit an annual report to the legislature regarding the progress of the Office. This is very important in order to monitor the breadth of coverage

The creation of this office is not just a matter of policy—it is a matter of fairness. COFA citizens have a long-standing history of partnership with the United States, and it is our moral responsibility to ensure that they have equitable access to the services they need to lead healthy and productive lives. The Office will need to work closely with all existing NPO's and County Health Care organizations to ensure all community groups are fully served.

By passing SB 442, Oregon will reaffirm its commitment to supporting all members of our community, fostering a more supportive environment for all COFA citizens. I urge the Joint Ways and Means Committee and the Oregon Legislature to pass this bill and take an important step toward justice and equity for this often-overlooked population. I believe that this bill will be a model for other states. Once again Oregon can lead the way by providing a COFA office that ensures our COFA allies will not be left out of the Safety Net system but will gain access to it.

Sincerely,

Loyd Henion
COFA Alliance National Network