



### **Community Update: Health Equity for COFA Islanders**

**Background:** The Freely Associated States are sovereign nations previously under the administrative control of the United States. Since 1986, the Compact of Free Association (COFA) between the Republic of the Marshall Islands, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia (Chuuk, Kosrae, Yap, Pohnpei), and the United States allows COFA citizens to freely enter, lawfully reside, and work in the US in exchange for providing the US exclusive military control of the region.

When the Compacts were originally signed, COFA migrants were eligible for Medicaid and other safety net programs. However, these migrants were excluded from benefits as a consequence of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act in 1996.

Currently, COFA migrants have limited access to health care benefits in the US, which perpetuates health inequities.

- Washington State has the second-largest population of Kosraeans and the third-largest population of Palauans and Marshallese people in the US.
- In Washington, large populations of COFA migrants reside in Auburn, Federal Way, Spokane, and Vancouver.
- The US conducted 67 nuclear atmospheric bomb tests in the Marshall Islands between 1946 and 1958. The radiation levels in many of the atolls remain extremely high – up to 7600 milligrays (mGy) compared to 10 mGy in the US.
- Marshallese people suffer high rates of cancer and other radiation-related diseases. A significant number of migrants continue to suffer from radiogenic diseases, birth defects, and chronic illnesses directly tied to US nuclear testing.
- Marshallese people suffer from high infant mortality (28.43 deaths/1,000 live births in 2006 estimation) and relatively low life expectancy (70.31 years in 2006 estimation).

#### **Progress:**

- Commission board voted to make this issue a legislative priority during the November 2015 board meeting.
- CAPAA staff met with the Health Care Authority to discuss legislative options in Washington.
- CAPAA staff met with the COFA Alliance National Network to learn about their achievements in Oregon to provide affordable healthcare to COFA Islanders.
- CAPAA staff met with Senator Patty Murray's office to discuss the issue. Senator Murray co-sponsored federal legislation S. 1301, Restoring Medicaid for Compact of Free Association Migrants.
- Representative Sharon Tomiko Santos introduced HB 2986, Concerning Health Care for Pacific Islanders Residing in Washington under a Compact of Free Association, during the 2016 legislative session.
- The State Board of Health and the Governor's Interagency Council on Health Disparities conducted a Health Impact Review for HB 2986. View the report: <http://tinyurl.com/jshe92z>.
- CAPAA staff is working with other state agencies and community partners on potential solutions to adopt a program similar to Oregon.

**Community Meeting with COFA Islanders:** CAPAA is hosting a meeting with the COFA community in Auburn to hear about their experiences and discuss legislative efforts in Oregon and Washington.

#### **Meeting Details:**

Saturday, October 1, 2016

10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.

Auburn Public Library, 1102 Auburn Way South, Auburn, WA 98002