

**STATEMENT
OF
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**BEFORE THE
HOUSE COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT & INVESTIGATIONS**

**REGARDING THE
U.S. NUCLEAR LEGACY IN THE MARSHALL ISLANDS**

October 21, 2021

Madam Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer thoughts on the U.S. nuclear legacy in the Marshall Islands.

I am the Executive Director for the Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese, responsible for the overall operation of the organization. One of my roles as the lead of the organization is to understand and address the well-being, strengths, and the challenges that the Marshallese community faces in Arkansas. I am also a U.S. military veteran who proudly served during the Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan.

Being part of the strongest security force that protects the Marshall Islands and other Freely Associated countries was the greatest accomplishment I pursued as a young woman. At no time did I ever questioned my decision to be part of the US military because I was taught to think of Americans as our friends, allies, and family. This unique friendship through the Compact of Free Association outlines the mutual symbiotic relationship between United States of America and the Republic of the Marshall Islands, which permits Marshallese and other Compact of Free Association (COFA) citizens to travel to the U.S without any need for visa or limitation of stay. American citizens are also afforded the same visitation freedom to the COFA nations.

It was later in my military career that I came to learn and better understand the crucial role of the Marshall Islands to the US national security and the rest of the free world. The Ronald Regan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site ,located on Kwajalein Atoll in the Marshall Islands, is a strategic site used to test cutting-edge radar systems, develop missile-interceptors, and advance space surveillance and satellite tracking¹; all of which provide defensive security shields to the United States from foreign powers. A vast body of the ocean is controlled by the United States for military purposes. The rate of enlistment and representation of Marshall Islanders and other COFA islanders to the United States military per capita is higher than many US states, affirming the sacrifice the small island nations sons and daughters contribute to U.S security and the security of the free world. The people of the Marshall Islands continue to provide their lands, their ocean, and their people for the protection of the United States.

The perilous impact of U.S. nuclear testing operations post World War II has come at tremendous cost to the citizens of the Marshall Islands and has left permanent scars, physically, environmentally, mentally, and historically The ramifications have caused massive damages resulting in inter-generational trauma, heightened fear, and increased mistrust within the Marshallese community of US involvement and intentions. I live with these folks in the Ozarks mountains of Northwest Arkansas and many are direct descendants of nuclear victims who have shared their personal stories of displacement and how the nuclear legacy has impacted their homes, food supplies, and their everyday lives. The victims and their families had to re-learn how to survive on different islands and generations later many are still looking for a permanent home. It is only right and imperative that the United States should examine and seriously evaluate the need for a relocation program for the affected islanders. This should be dealt as high priority and should acknowledge that the pathway to Naturalization/Citizenship should be part of the relocation plan.

I regularly deal with consumer-related challenges as well as immigration needs and have a deep knowledge of impacts that contribute to the poor socioeconomic status of the Marshallese diaspora in Arkansas. We are engulfed with complicated immigration issues that seem simple on the surface; yet, the root cause is much more complex due to incompliance protocols that comes with programs such as the e-verification that the United States put into its administrative policies. These practices are not coherent and contradict the purpose of the Compact of Free Association. Most of these protocols are designed to address the general “immigrant” classification but failed to address migrants with “NON-IMMIGRANT” status as it relates to the Marshallese or other COFA islanders. One example of this issue is with the replacement of the I-94 form. This is an arduous issue that almost cost the livelihood of a hard-working single mother like Stephanie Takamaru, whose incurred a medical bill of \$200,000. She was informed that her I-94 form did not match her passport and without a replacement of her I-94, she wouldn’t be able to apply for Medicaid. Citizens of the Freely Associated States under the Compact of Free Association are impacted by irregularity in policy, thus isolating the community and disconnecting the people from access to resources including housing, employment, healthcare and other simple things such as getting a Driver’s License or renewing an identification card.

¹ <https://www.bechtel.com/projects/kwajalein-test-range/>

It was only through the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic and the inherent difficulties and challenges that the US government realized the need to restore Medicaid coverage for our Marshallese and other COFA citizens living in the US. In fact, the Medicaid Program was part of the Compact of Free Association and should have never been taken away from COFA citizens. It took 25 years to fix a simple oversight. We are 25 years too late to help community members like Lisa Clarence. She is a direct descendant of a nuclear victim. Lisa has been battling a thyroid tumor case for many years. Like many other Marshallese, Lisa's medical bill of \$21,000 has caused her to pay higher interest rates. People with similar stories as Lisa's will have challenges reaching their full potentials economically.

In Arkansas, such as well as many other states like Hawaii, Utah, Iowa, Washington, Oregon, and California, Marshallese are an integral integrated part of the states' fabrics. By May 2020, the COVID-19 Pandemic disproportionately impacted the Marshallese community, causing nearly 50% of death cases in the NWA region. Often not talked about in the news is a workforce of essential workers from the Marshallese community who stood on the frontlines of the COVID work. These essential community members are in the police force, healthcare industry, research institutions, transportation systems, food industry, home nursing among many others. Organizations led by Marshallese community members/advocates/leaders fed over 25,000 individuals and provided over 10,000 masks and PPE to the NWA community. The Marshallese community is an important part of the NWA fabric and will continue to play a significant role in the United States. In Springdale Arkansas alone there are over 3,300 Marshallese students.

I-94 Form Renewal: The Compact of Free Association gives an indefinite life of the I-94 but that is not what we are experiencing. When a citizen of the FAS nations enters the United States, an I-94 form is assigned to the new arrival and automatically granted indefinite life². If the form is lost at any point, replacing it is more complicated. If a passport that was used during the entry is renewed due to expiration date, the issued I-94 form will fail the verification process. This can lead to an immediate termination of employment. It can also lead to involuntarily drop from healthcare plans and other public services. Getting a Driver's License or an Identification Card can be a problem. There are two ways for renewal, the first is to apply for a replacement online, in which it costs about \$445. The second way is to make a re-entry to the United States, which means a person from Arkansas needs to drive total of 28 hours or fly to the border of Texas/Mexico (closest port of entry).

The renegotiation of the Compact of the Free Association is scheduled to take place in year 2023. I ask and recommend that the United States team who will be involved also reach out to the Marshallese communities in the United States and hear their perspectives.

² U.S. Citizenship Immigration and Services, Immigration Status of Citizens of FSM, RMI and Palau, <https://www.uscis.gov/i-9-central/complete-correct-form-i-9/federated-states-of-micronesia-republic-of-the-marshall-islands-and-palau>

Although the COFA Medicaid coverage has been restored since Dec 2020, we are still having issues of our citizens applications getting processed on a timely basis by person who understand who we are as COFA citizen nor understand what is the COFA. There is no equity in this across ALL 50 states, thus challenges are still pervasive in states that do not have “significant” numbers of Marshallese or other COFA citizens. If it is taking Arkansas DHS 3-4 months on average to process such applications, it’s concerning to even think what our Marshallese/COFA citizens are experiencing in Maine, Alabama, DC, Wyoming or other states that are not familiar with COFA or who we are. It should not be upon us to educate all the DHS in all states this, but we are more than willing to assist them in educating them if needed.

The LIFT the BAR Act (HR5227), led by by Representative Pramila Jayapal (D-WA) that aims to restores access to programs like Medicaid, CHIP, and SNAP, by removing the five-year bar and other barriers that deny critical care and aid to people who are lawfully present should be supported and passed.

The US Nuclear Testing Program in the RMI not only led to direct health impacts such as tumors, blood cancers, skin cancers, thyroid cancers, stillbirths, but also to indirect impact of chronic diseases that we are known to have a high prevalence rates. For example, the rates of DM2 in the Marshallese is estimated to be between 25 -40% in comparison to US rates of 8-10%. Such chronic conditions lead to unhealthy community members. These are the members that should be afforded easy access to healthcare to better managed and control these conditions EARLY. Unfortunately, because or lack or limited access to healthcare, many develop the complications of such chronic conditions including heart disease, strokes, hypertension, kidney disease among others. We need to invest on the front end to prevent poor health outcomes for our citizens so they can continue to be productive community members of their respective states of residencies.

In closing, we cannot change the history, but we can move forward to making a better world. Let’s put actions into promises that have been voided for years. Don’t turn your back to the people who have helped you win wars and provide the best national security strategy. I will end with a Marshallese proverb: “*An Bwilinlin Ekomman Lometo*” translates into “multiple droplets create a vast ocean”. Thank you for the opportunity.