



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

March 13, 2024

Congress Restores Federal Benefits Eligibility for COFA Citizens in the U.S.

Approves COFA Agreements and assistance to COFA Veterans

WASHINGTON – AAPCHO today released the following statement following the restoration of federal public benefits eligibility for Pacific Islanders from the Marshall Islands, Palau, and the Federated States of Micronesia (collectively the Freely Associated States or FAS) living in the United States.

The Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2024, signed into law by President Biden on March 9, 2024, included the text of the Compact Impact Fairness Act (CIFA), which received bipartisan support in the Senate and House of Representatives. The Act added Compacts of Free Association (COFA) citizens living in the U.S. to the list of noncitizens eligible to receive federal public benefits. Congress also waived the five-year bar so eligible COFA citizens can apply for federal benefits as soon as they enter the U.S. This will allow COFA citizens to apply for programs such as the Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP); Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP or food stamps); Temporary Assistance of Needy Families (TANF); Supplemental Security Income (SSI); and FEMA Individual and Household Programs. Congress previously restored Medicaid eligibility in 2020.

“For nearly 30 years, our brothers and sisters from the Freely Associated States have been unable to get the support they need because of an error in federal law,” said Jeffrey B. Caballero, executive director of AAPCHO. “This legislation builds on the success community advocates made in 2020 when Congress restored Medicaid eligibility for COFA citizens, and it will help ensure that they are not left out of important programs such as CHIP, SNAP, FEMA emergency assistance, and TANF. We are also pleased that Congress extended much-needed support for U.S. veterans living in the FAS to get the health care they need without having to leave their home islands, including by establishing VA partnerships with community health centers in the FAS.

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“AAPCHO commends Senators Mazie Hirono (D-HI), Brian Schatz (D-HI) and John Boozman (R-AR) and Representatives Ed Case (D-HI), Jill Tokuda (D-HI), and Steve Womack (R-AR), and President Biden for their leadership in increasing access to health care and social services. We are committed to working with our COFA community partners and member health centers to ensure the states and territories implement this provision expeditiously.”

The CAA also approved renewed COFA agreements between the U.S. and the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Republic of Palau. These agreements are the foundation of the relationship between the U.S. and the FAS that provide mutual national defense and economic benefits in the Pacific. The Biden administration completed COFA renewal negotiations with each of the FAS countries in 2023; Congressional approval allows the administration to move forward with implementing the new agreements.

Moreover, the funding package included text of the Care for COFA Veterans Act to expand health care to veterans living in the FAS. The legislation removes restrictions on the VA from providing services to veterans residing in the FAS, including by permitting contracts with community health centers and other community clinics, and establishing clinic options via telehealth. It would also allow VA to ship medications to veterans in the FAS and reimburse veterans for travel from their home countries to the U.S. for care connected to the military service.

About AAPCHO

AAPCHO is a national association of community health organizations dedicated to promoting advocacy, collaboration and leadership that improves the health status and access of Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders in the United States. For more information on AAPCHO, please visit www.aapcho.org.

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