

Piti Mayor Jesse L.G. Alig
President, Mayors' Council of Guam
Testimony on H.R. 6273
House Committee on Natural Resources
Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs
United States Congress
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Good afternoon and *Håfa Adai*, Chairman Harriet Hageman and distinguished members of the House Committee on Natural Resources and the Subcommittee on Indian and Insular Affairs.

My name is Jesse Alig, and I am the Mayor of Piti, a village in Guam. I present this testimony as the President of the Mayors' Council of Guam. Nineteen mayors and seven vice mayors comprise our Council, and I am in my second term as President.

I sincerely thank you for this esteemed opportunity to speak on the importance of passing H.R. 6273, the "Guam Host Community Compensation Act," introduced by Guam's Congressional Delegate James Moylan.

While many other proponents will testify, referencing vital statistics and historical data, today, I offer you my perspective on the impact of the Compact of Free Association – or COFA – from a grassroots level.

I ask you to indulge me as I begin my testimony by painting a picture of a COFA migrant's journey into my beautiful island home, which is home to approximately 165,000 Guamanians.

A couple with seven children living in Chuuk makes the difficult decision to send the husband to Guam in search of better opportunities. Chuukese is his first language, and he is not proficient in English. Upon arrival in Guam, all travelers must go through the customs and immigration process. He needs help understanding the forms presented to him for completion and answers them as best as he can. Upon leaving the baggage claim terminal, family or friends residing in Guam meet him, and he is excited at the prospect of one day reuniting with his wife and children in Guam.

He is not accustomed to searching online for jobs, so he begins his job search by speaking with those in his social circle. After several months on Guam, living with 15 relatives in a sub-standard, wood and tin, two-bedroom home, and remaining unemployed – he finally lands a job as a yard maintenance worker and earns less than \$500 a month. He slowly discovers that reunification with his family will be more complicated than imagined, and he longs for his wife and children.

Out of frustration, he turns to alcohol to numb the loneliness and pain of being unable to provide the life he and his wife dreamed of for their family. He continues to utilize alcohol as a crutch and, in an inebriated state, commits an unintentional crime of vehicular homicide. He then becomes a consumer within Guam's justice system.

This story I just shared with you is more common than you think. Although the man in this story unintentionally committed vehicular homicide – if you were to google crimes on Guam involving COFA migrants – you would quickly see stories that include sexual abuse, home invasion, assault, robbery, and the list goes on and on.

Guam has graciously hosted our COFA guests from the Federated States of Micronesia, the Republic of Palau, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands for almost four decades. In 2018, the U.S. Census Bureau officially reported that Guam has the highest number of COFA migrants in the country, with 18,874 residents from the Freely Associated States, or a little over 10% of our total population. Now, in 2024, the number is estimated to be around 24,000 migrants, close to 15% of Guam's population, which includes a couple of generations of COFA-American citizens.

Despite hosting the most COFA migrants, Guam still does not receive the most significant amount of Compact Impact funding. The Office of Insular Affairs allocated only \$35 million in Compact Impact Funding, including \$5 million, which may be available at the discretion of Congress. Guam's cost alone for educating, providing healthcare as well as enforcing the law, and keeping COFA migrants safe is at \$30 million annually.

Guam has received between \$14 million and \$17 million since 2003 from the federal government for hosting COFA migrants, which has been grossly insufficient. Our island leaders, including current and former governors, our current and former Congressional

delegates, and our current and former legislators, have traveled to Washington, DC, for several decades, meeting with leaders of our federal government to increase COFA reimbursements for Guam, but to no avail. To complicate matters, the latest COFA agreement expired in September 2023, and Guam is not scheduled to receive Compact Impact funding. Congressman Moylan's legislation, H.R. 6273, will restore this critical Compact-Impact funding for another ten years.

A significant area of concern regarding COFA migrants is the high volume of criminal activity, from theft and driving under the influence to violent crimes like sexual assault and even murder. One in five convicted criminals currently incarcerated at Guam's correctional facility is from one of the Freely Associated States, and in 2023, more than one-third of arrests were COFA citizens. It is virtually impossible to see a local police blotter, open a Guam newspaper, or watch a local television newscast without seeing a COFA migrant arrested, charged, and incarcerated for a felonious crime.

The negative impact this has on our community is overwhelming, including the cost of investigating these crimes, prosecuting the accused, and eventual incarceration, not to mention the damage and trauma each victim of their crimes in our community has to bear. Congressman Moylan will alleviate the incarceration component through H.R. 6273 by requiring the Federal Bureau of Prisons to incarcerate FAS citizens who are convicted of a felony.

H.R. 6273 will also mandate that COFA citizens provide proof of work or education before permanently settling in Guam.

Making matters worse, Guam's homeless population has increased exponentially since the COFA agreement was enacted, many of whom are FAS citizens. Our mayors have to deal with this issue at the village level. Guam's homeless look to unlawfully occupy abandoned houses or homes that are currently vacant and are in between rental tenants. Guam's parks are littered with many homeless COFA migrants. Because of their constant loitering and many in an inebriated disposition, homeowners, churches, and small businesses are forced to make costly mitigation efforts on their private properties to keep them safe.

My words alone are insufficient to describe the enormous impact of COFA citizens on Guam's quality of life. There are many realities that the mayors see and experience that many outsiders – including here in Washington, DC – don't see and may not immediately understand. Therefore, when you receive testimony recommending COFA children attend Department of Defense schools instead of our overcrowded and strained Guam school system or receive medical care at the U.S. Naval Hospital instead of the dilapidated Guam Memorial Hospital, please consider them as solutions in support of our absolute willingness to ensure we take care of all residents.

The residents of Guam have welcomed COFA citizens to our small island, and we will continue to invite them and take care of them. However, their impact and burden must be addressed and funded. On behalf of the Mayors' Council of Guam, I implore you to pass H.R. 6273 to allow us to continue to adequately improve and maintain the quality of life for all U.S. citizens and COFA migrants on the island of Guam.

Through passage, Guam can address issues from the front end. We are advocates of culture and welcome all cultures to our home. Through proper assimilation, we can help our COFA brothers and sisters fulfill their dreams by providing a stronger start. We put enormous efforts into educating young children, and I believe the idea can carry on to our COFA migrant crisis. Solutions should now focus on the front end of migrant issues rather than dealing with them at the final straw.

My proposal for using the financial support enabled by this legislation would be to establish a welcoming process upon a COFA migrant's arrival in Guam. By establishing this process, I believe we can better address potential issues before they arise and improve COFA migrants at the start of their journey. Assimilation should include education on social services, legal processes, and local and federal laws.

While this sounds like it should be already in place, Guam cannot financially support these necessary services using its current budget.

Let it be clear that there are success stories of COFA migrants on Guam. They are our managers, supervisors, caregivers, our pastors, our cooks and our helpers. Because of their respect and appreciation of culture and life, we entrust our families and our homes to their care.

I hope this testimony has shed some light on our daily issues living together in Guam. Guam is a melting pot of many cultures and we are well known and recognized for our hospitality and family-oriented nature in the western Pacific region. We want to continue to be warm and welcoming to those who wish to call it home. But the hard reality is that there is a cost to ensuring a safe and caring community and we look forward to working with our federal partners to make this happen.

Thank you!