

Building People Up: The COFA Crisis in the Land of Aloha

Although homelessness is one of the most prevalent issues in Hawaii, few are aware that much of the problem can be traced back to weapons testing from the 1950s. In the years after World War II, U.S. nuclear weapons testing decimated the Marshall Islands and the lives of its inhabitants. The Compact of Free Association (COFA) agreement granted Micronesians visa-free migration to the United States to alleviate the consequences of the nuclear fallout. It also promises Marshallese people protection and assistance in America. Upon moving, however, COFA migrants often face language barriers, discrimination, and a lack of access to housing. In order to address homelessness in Hawaii, the government must first address the COFA migrant crisis by building on the values of Clarence T.C. Ching and creating policies to protect Marshallese immigrants.

COFA migrants in Hawaii experience homelessness at a disproportionate rate. Although they only make up one percent of the population in Hawaii, Micronesians account for 15 percent of those receiving services for homelessness, and 16 percent of Micronesian families in Hawaii are either living in a homeless shelter or on the streets. Instead of helping migrants, state sit-lie bans do COFA migrants more harm than good; the University of Hawaii Department of Urban and Regional Planning found that the sit-lie ban does not encourage individuals to move to shelters and actually cause “property and economic loss...[and] physical and psychological harm.” The burdens of inadequate housing access are worsened by language barriers. Even if a COFA migrant can afford a home, communication problems often hinder them from finding one. For those who do not speak English, meeting potential landlords and filling out forms is especially difficult. Documents are not translated into Micronesian languages, and interpreters are rarely offered. In addition, COFA migrants often face housing discrimination. Racist

perceptions of Micronesians as “lazy” create a hostile environment of blatant and subtle discrimination. In interviews with community leaders and Micronesian people, the Hawaii Appleseed Center heard several migrants share the same story: they were told an apartment was available over the phone, met the landlord in person, and then were told the unit was no longer open. Prejudice may be as great an epidemic as the homelessness crisis itself. Without more effective state policy and federal assistance in making housing more accessible, the homelessness crisis in Hawaii will only grow worse.

Clarence T.C. Ching’s legacy lives on in the efforts made to assist COFA migrants. While others built the glamorous hotels and alluring shopping malls of Waikiki, Mr. Ching focused his efforts on the modest areas of Moanalua and Salt Lake. The development of Kukui Gardens in the 1960s provided over 800 low-income families with housing. The deal would not make a return on investment for decades, but Mr. Ching pursued it anyway; he valued people over wealth. His ambitious real estate projects illustrate the type of Hawaii Mr. Ching sought to create: a place that could be a home, not just a tourist attraction. Micronesian immigrants should not be excluded from that vision. Supporting COFA migrants would not only improve the lives of countless homeless families, but it would also secure the values by which Ching lived his life.

In the thirty years since the Compact of Free Association was signed, Micronesians have flocked to Hawaii in greater numbers while losing access to vital resources. In another fifty years, the problem will only grow worse. The COFA agreement is currently set to expire in 2023; it is unclear whether Congress will renew it. If the program does end in 2023, there will likely be a large wave of Micronesian migrants to Hawaii. A greater population of migrants without any meaningful policy advancements would only exacerbate the problems already present today. In addition, climate change has made the Marshallese Islands especially

vulnerable, and many people are expected to move to the United States in response. In the next few decades, one would see more homelessness, more poverty, and more discrimination—unless we act now.

In recent years, Hawaii has explored several solutions to the lack of accessible housing. In 2017, the state legislature started the Housing First Program, which provides permanent housing for the homeless, along with personalized support services. In 2018, the program reportedly sheltered nearly two thousand people, the vast majority of whom were chronically homeless. The program had a 92% retention rate. However, that alone is not enough. Interpreters and translated documents should be provided for migrants searching for housing who do not speak English. In order to prevent housing discrimination, housing laws, such as the Fair Housing Rights and Equal Housing Opportunity laws, need to be further enforced. COFA migrants must also be better educated about their options when they do encounter discrimination. Although they experience prejudice often, COFA migrants are less likely than other immigrant groups to assert their rights for fear of “rocking the boat.” With social and community support, more COFA migrants may feel comfortable coming forward, which would lead to more effective action. Although the situation may seem dire, action such as the Housing First program proves that it is not too late. Hawaii can still fix its COFA migrant crisis. By exploring more possibilities, the state can prevent the problem from growing worse.

Micronesians have already suffered from the legacy of U.S. war and weapons. When they arrive in America, it is imperative to build them up, not cast them out. Especially in the land of aloha, where Clarence T.C. Ching worked tirelessly to help his community, everyone should have the support they need. Only when we address the homelessness crisis and expand housing access for COFA migrants will we achieve the future that Mr. Ching worked toward.