



EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

2433 Massachusetts Avenue, N.W.,

Washington, D.C. 20008

Tel. # (202) 234-5414 * Fax # (202) 232-3236 * E-mail: info@rmiembassyus.org

“The Disproportionate Impact of COVID-19 on Communities of Color” Ways & Means Committee May 27, 2020

Statement of H.E. Gerald Zackios, Ambassador The Embassy of the Republic of the Marshall Islands

As the United States and the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) confront the global pandemic as allies, the incidence and impact of COVID-19 on Marshallese residing in the United States has become a topic of great concern.

There have been more than 150 cases of COVID-19 in the U.S. Marshallese community and more than 15 fatalities. These numbers are significant given the size of our U.S. based population of roughly 20,000, many of whom arrived in the U.S. to seek better work, education, and medical opportunities.

Many Marshallese are employed in the meat and poultry industry or processing facilities, and in other service industries. Given the nature of their jobs, these individuals have greater exposure to the coronavirus and higher risk of spreading the virus within their multigenerational households. They continue in their jobs as essential workers today.

The incidence from COVID-19 among Marshallese living in the U.S. tracks closely with RMI employment in these meat and poultry processing facilities. Our cases are centered among our workers in Arkansas, Iowa and Ohio, with additional cases in Utah, Colorado, Washington and Hawaii.

To complicate the situation further, Marshallese and other Pacific Island populations tend to have more chronic diseases than the average U.S. population. Diabetes is particularly prevalent. Cancer rates are also unusually high among the Marshallese, a situation commonly attributed to the extensive nuclear testing that the U.S. conducted in the RMI between 1946 and 1958. The residual nuclear waste remains on our islands today.

The Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) has an extremely close relationship with the United States that spans over seven decades. In 1986, the United States and the Marshall Islands signed a Compact of Free Association, which when approved by Congress and the U.N. Security Council ended the RMI's status as a territory administered by the United States.

The Compact outlines a “special and unique” relationship between our two countries. Under the terms of the agreement, Marshallese are free to live and work in the U.S. as legal nonimmigrants and the U.S. controls all aspects of RMI national defense security.

The RMI is proud of our sons and daughters serving in the U.S. Armed Forces and to host the preeminent Ronald Reagan Ballistic Missile Defense Test Site on our Kwajalein Atoll.

We also appreciate the importance of the right of strategic denial granted to the U.S. under the terms of our Compact, which permits the U.S. to deny other nations access to RMI’s lands and waters, an expansive area in a geopolitically sensitive area of the North Pacific roughly the size of Texas.

The terms of the Compact also explicitly provide health care resources for the Republic of the Marshall Islands as well as areas of the U.S. that are home to significant Marshallese communities.

Consistent with the letter and spirit of the Compact, Marshallese residents of the United States were included in the federal Medicaid program until 1996 when The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act incidentally ended Medicaid coverage for RMI legal nonimmigrants in a provision intended to curtail federal benefits for immigrants.

The Embassy of the Republic of the Marshall Islands is grateful to the House of Representatives for fixing this error and reinstating Medicaid coverage for Marshallese legal nonimmigrants in the U.S. in the Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions (HEROES) Act. We hope this provision will become law soon.

Marshallese access to domestic healthcare funding is critical not just from a public health perspective but also as a basic matter of diplomacy. It is important that Marshallese communities supporting essential workers in U.S. meat and poultry processing plants and other areas have the resources needed to treat the COVID-19 virus and stop its spread.

Your continued leadership on this matter is greatly appreciated.