



Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese Responds to New Findings Showing Higher Rates of COVID-19 in Pacific Islander Communities

Calls for Increased Access to Resources and Disaggregated Data to Combat Spread of Pandemic

Springdale, Ark. – The Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese (ACOM) today released the following statement in response to new key findings showing the alarming disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on Pacific Islander communities in Arkansas. Analysis of COVID-19 data show Pacific Islanders have the highest COVID-19 case rates and death rates in the state.

In order to assess and better respond to the needs of Marshallese communities in Arkansas amid the COVID-19 pandemic, ACOM worked with community partners and researchers to conduct in-depth analysis of COVID-19 state data, which groups Marshallese with other Pacific Islanders. Through its partnership with the national [Pacific Islander COVID-19 Response Team](#), ACOM received support from Dr. Ninez Ponce, UCLA public health professor and director of the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research, to analyze Arkansas Department of Health COVID-19 data.

Key findings from the data analysis show that despite being less than one percent of the total state population, Pacific Islanders have up to 4.5 times higher case rates and up to 4.5 times higher death rates compared to any other racial/ethnic group in the state.

Pacific Islanders Case Rate per 100K	Arkansas State Average Case Rate per 100K	Pacific Islanders Death Rate per 100K	Arkansas State Average Death Rate per 100K
563.95	124.33	13.1	2.9

Data Source: Arkansas Department of Health as of May 9, 2020.

In addition to analysis of the data from the Arkansas Department of Health, ACOM also worked with the Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum and other community partners to conduct its own community needs assessment resulting in responses from over 450 Marshallese households in just over a week. “ACOM did this study to find out how many families have been directly affected with

COVID-19 and how they are handling the pandemic,” said Faith Laukon, ACOM spokesperson.

Analysis of responses to the community assessment illustrate underlying health and social conditions that make Marshallese and other Pacific Islander families and communities vulnerable to the pandemic including: 82% of respondents reporting they have essential workers in the household; 51% have household members with diabetes, obesity or high blood pressure; and 15% have household members that are 65 years or older. All of these conditions put Pacific Islanders at increased risk to getting infected and experiencing serious complications from COVID-19.

The assessment also showed the top five needs in the community: housing related expenses (paying rent and utilities), personal protection equipment (especially masks), food, health insurance and stronger broadband/internet access. “We must ensure vulnerable groups like the Marshall Islanders are provided with resources, whether it is access to testing, tracing, isolation or social support. We are currently experiencing multiple layers of needs ranging from COVID-19 testing cost to rent payment assistance,” said Melisa Laelan, founding executive director of ACOM.

ACOM, with other Pacific Islander community leaders and advocates, are concerned that this high number of essential workers coupled with communal cultural practices will further accelerate the spread of the virus in Marshallese and other Pacific Islander communities. Additionally, existing high rates of underlying health conditions such as heart disease and diabetes will result in high rates of death in the community.

“We urge legislators to respond to the needs of our communities by extending state programs like Medicaid and the SNAP program to Marshallese citizens who are lawfully residing in the United States under a Compact of Free Association (COFA). Equally important, we want to highlight the need for disaggregated data at the state level as Marshallese-specific data are not available. Increased access to resources and data is essential to stopping the spread of the pandemic within Pacific Islander communities and to public health overall,” said Laelan.

ACOM is committed to working with policymakers, philanthropic partners, and community allies to stop the spread of COVID-19, and to help Pacific Islanders and other communities disproportionately affected by this pandemic. “We want to thank funders and partners who are currently providing support to our work in response to the COVID-19 pandemic including Prosperity Now, Tyson Family Foundation, University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences, Arkansas Community Foundation, United Way NWA and Arkansas Black Hall of Fame,” Laukon added.

ACOM calls on Arkansas state officials and other policymakers to increase access to testing and tracing for Pacific Islanders and all communities, while increasing the collection and reporting of disaggregated race/ethnic data to stop the spread of the virus. ACOM urges Congress to support the [Health and Economic Recovery Omnibus Emergency Solutions \(HEROES\) Act](#), a \$3 trillion

package to provide additional economic relief amidst the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, which would restore Medicaid coverage to COFA migrants. The HEROES Act is an important first step towards the long-needed fix to reinstate COFA eligibility for Medicaid and ACOM calls on Congress to move quickly to pass this bill.

About ACOM

The Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese (ACOM) is a non-profit organization dedicated to improving the quality of life of Marshallese communities in Arkansas. For more information about ACOM, visit www.arkansasmarshallese.org.

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