

## TAKING A STAND FOR THEIR COMMUNITIES



CINDY ELLEN RUSSELL / CRUSSELL@STARADVERTISER.COM

Religious leaders, homeless individuals and homeless advocates delivered letters to the mayor, City Council members, legislators and the governor on Aug. 4, offering their ideas for helping the homeless. Above, the group's members held signs as they waited for Gov. David Ige at the Capitol.

# MICRONESIANS UNITED

Migrants from COFA countries band together to navigate Hawaii's unfamiliar social and economic systems

By Vicki Viotti  
viotti@staradvertiser.com

It's called the Compact of Free Association (COFA), meaning that citizens of those Micronesian countries can migrate to the U.S. without the usual visas or other documents. Getting to Hawaii is easy.

Living in Hawaii, or anywhere in the U.S., is hard. What the COFA migrants need, and soon will be getting, is help in making the transition a little easier. That help may come in various forms — including the possibility of a charter school (see story, Page E4).

But the immediate boost has come in the form of federal grants aimed at helping to create a "one-stop" center to help Micronesians navigate a Western culture and social system that is foreign to them. The bulk of the money so far

was announced Friday by the U.S. Department of the Interior, which awarded \$250,000 toward the establishment of such a center in Hawaii.

The official recipient of the funds is an existing nonprofit, Partners in Development Foundation, a group with a Native Hawaiian support mission but which has been tapped to mentor a new Micronesian advocacy group: We Are Oceania. That group, say its founders, will work collectively with myriad other grassroots organizations that have coalesced around migrant concerns.

"We are all one people with one mission, and that is to be able to navigate and be successful in our new environment," said Josie Howard, director of We Are Oceania and a migrant from Chuuk, part of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM),

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Nations covered by COFA comprise the FSM, the Republic of the Marshall Islands and the Republic of Palau. Under that accord, COFA citizens are denied some of the assists that new immigrants can get.

Once they arrive, the barriers can seem insurmountable. Many come to America for health care, but those arriving after 1996, when a federal reform reclassified residents of COFA nations in the U.S. as "nonqualified aliens," no longer were eligible for federally funded care under Medicaid.

The basic health coverage they get is insufficient to what many of them need.

Neither do the new migrants qualify for most welfare benefits or Social Security, although taxes taken from their paychecks go into those funds.

They can get public housing, but the units are in short supply, as are the jobs that help pay the bills. Many are among the homeless families camping on the streets of Honolulu.

Language barriers can lead them astray in understanding the terms of their lease and any number of obligations. They can land in trouble, and in court, where there are more language barriers and little guidance.

Micronesian communities themselves are culturally diverse: The FSM alone comprises four separate states and

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