

## **Report on Workshop Sponsored by COBAJ**

### ***“More than Just Interpreting Words:***

### ***Cultural and Linguistic Barriers for Micronesians to Access Justice”***

#### **Background**

As part of its Strategic Plan for 2015, the Committee on Overcoming Barriers to Access Justice (COBAJ) requested the opportunity to present a workshop during the 2015 Access to Justice Conference to address continuing critical issues facing Micronesians in Hawai‘i as they fail to have real access to justice. In planning the workshop, COBAJ was cognizant of comments from participants at previous Access to Justice Conferences, intentionally planning this workshop to feature new, diverse speakers from the community in a format limiting the length of presentations while providing greater opportunity for participation from workshop participants. The format would also facilitate recommendations to the Commission on strategies to improve access for this population.

The workshop featured two Micronesian speakers: Ms. Beverlynn Simina and Dr. Sheldon Riklon. Ms. Simina, from Chuuk and a graduate of the University of Hawai‘i at Hilo, has worked as the Intake Coordinator at Volunteer Legal Services for six years. She is also a certified Chuukese interpreter. Dr. Riklon, a graduate of the John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM), is one of only two Marshallese medical doctors. After working as a physician in the Marshall Islands, he accepted a clinical position at JABSOM and currently chairs the Micronesian Health Committee. Both of these speakers had extensive first-hand knowledge of the issues facing the Micronesian population in Hawai‘i.

Several meetings with Ms. Simina and Dr. Riklon prior to the workshop helped them coordinate their remarks and ensure adequate time for participation by workshop participants. Dr. Riklon also included PowerPoint slides in his remarks. Additionally, a two-sided information sheet on Micronesia (copy attached) was distributed to workshop participants.

Fifty-five people preregistered to attend the workshop; actual attendance included more than sixty people. The two presentations lasted about 25 minutes total, leaving ample time for questions and comments from the audience, with responses from the two speakers. Audience participation was lively and filled available time.

#### **Evaluation**

Of the 88 evaluation forms submitted following the 2015 Access to Justice Conference, 15 rated this workshop “excellent.” Several helpful comments were included in the responses. These have been shared with COBAJ and with the two speakers.

## **Emerging Issues from Workshop**

- Access to justice is a continuing critical issue and need for Micronesians;
- Overt and implicit bias exists in the community, the press, and the courts;
- Interpreter services are inadequate, are often inappropriate (wrong language or dialect), and fail to take into consideration cultural mores on class and gender differences;
- Written translations are often grossly unintelligible to speakers of the languages;
- No quality control exists for oral interpretations or written translations;
- Becoming a language interpreter is not a sought-for position—to be trained costs money, there are no scholarships, it is not a full-time position, being on-call precludes being able to be otherwise fully employed, the work often requires inconvenient travel, and no benefits are provided;
- More work is needed to educate migrant populations to prepare them for the cultural difference between living in their home islands and living in Hawaii; and,
- The Commission needs to tap the expertise of respected COFA community members who are knowledgeable about their culture and the legal and community expectations in Hawai‘i.

## **COBAJ Recommendations from the Workshop**

The majority of COBAJ members participated in the workshop. The COBAJ meeting on July 17, 2015, discussed the workshop, reviewed the comments from workshop participants and from Conference participants, and produced the following recommendations to the Commission.

- Although much has been done to improve language access in Hawai‘i, for many language access remains an unrealized dream. Revitalize the Roundtable to address issues of the inadequate number of interpreters and lack of quality control in oral interpreters and in written translations—consider an article in the Hawaii Bar Journal highlighting the problems.
- Consider establishing staff positions for interpreters within the Courts *{COBAJ members volunteered to explore this possibility.}*
- As is being done successfully on the neighbor islands, consider scheduling court cases (e.g., Family Court or Juvenile Court) for speakers of the same language on the same day to facilitate access to highly-qualified interpreters.
- Encourage the updating, wide distribution, and utilization of information to immigrants, such as “Voyaging Together to a New Life.” *{COBAJ members volunteered to contact various agencies to explore possibility of grants for this purpose.}*
- Explore creating a pilot “Court Navigator” program in Hawai‘i. *{a COBAJ member will explore grant possibility for this program.}*