



PI-CoPCE

PACIFIC ISLANDER CENTER OF PRIMARY CARE EXCELLENCE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 12, 2020

PI-CoPCE Announces New Policy Council, Mobilizes Community for Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Voter Week of Action Ahead of 2020 U.S. Elections

BURIEN, Wash. – The Pacific Islander Center of Primary Care Excellence (PI-CoPCE) announced today that it has convened a new Policy Council. The Council is part of PI-CoPCE’s broader efforts to establish its fifth Pillar or strategic focus area, to advocate for the unique and diverse health and other social justice needs and priorities of Native Hawaiian (NH) and Pacific Islander (PI) communities across the United States, Hawaii, and the U.S. Pacific. The Council is made up of a broad coalition of NH and PI trusted community-based leaders and organizers who have mobilized a nationwide [NHPI Voter Week of Action](#) **this week from October 12-16.**

The COVID-19 pandemic has shed light on societal inequities including health care, research, policy, and essential community services. Although data that separates NH and PI numbers from the general population is limited, the states and counties that are reporting this data show NH and PI are disproportionately affected by COVID-19—with some regions seeing [rates of infection up to five times that of white people.](#)

For this reason, and many other deep-seated disparities and injustices experienced by NH and PI people, PI-CoPCE’s Policy Council is dedicated to promoting advocacy, collaboration, and leadership that improves the health and well-being of NH and PI communities.

“PI-CoPCE was established to improve the health of Pacific Islanders in the United States and U.S. Pacific through primary care support, research, workforce development, community initiatives, and now policy and community advocacy,” said Nena Tolenoa, chair of PI-CoPCE and board member of the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations. “We are humbled and inspired by the dedication and wisdom in our communities and call on all Pacific Islanders to join us with the Policy Council and allies in fighting for the health access and other basic rights our people need and deserve.”

The Council is being led by co-chairs Joseph Seia, founding executive director of the Pacific Islander Community Association of Washington (PICA-WA), and Margarita Satini, executive director of the Utah Pacific Islander Civic Engagement Coalition (UPICEC). Mr. Seia and Ms. Satini together have decades of advocacy and community engagement experience and share a commitment to working directly with NH and PI communities.

“PICA-WA serves as a cultural home, centers community power and advocates to further the wellness of Pacific Islander communities in Washington State. We are committed to building powerful collaborations with other Pasifika leaders throughout the States to advance our sovereign voice,” said Mr. Seia. “Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander Political Autonomy is critical for the survival of our communities. We will only thrive when we are driving our own political destiny and are charged with stewarding the collective wellness and wealth of our communities. No one else can do this for us, but us.”

“The goal of UPICEC is to bolster civic engagement and build political power with Utah's Pacific Islander community, which consists of voter registration, leadership development, community base building, and more,” added Ms. Satini.

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“As a member of PI-CoPCE, I see the work we're doing along with our sister Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander organizations around the nation as history in the making, a momentous opportunity like never before, to have a seat at the table on a federal level and to be recognized as an organization working autonomously for our people and in partnership with our national allies.”

Members of the Policy Council further recognize that [Compact of Free Association \(COFA\)](#) people have unique needs and that it is critical their voice is heard in the collective policy and advocacy work of NH and PI communities.

“The mission of the Marshallese Women’s Association is to advocate, educate, and empower our Marshallese community to support and strengthen the culture of Marshallese people so they thrive,” said CeCe Heine, PI-CoPCE Policy Council member and executive board member of the Marshallese Women’s Association. “Part of our thriving means that we address the health injustices rooted in U.S. nuclear bombings that decimated our Oceans and poisoned the bodies of so many Marshallese Islanders. This is intimately related to why we have the highest death rates of COVID-19. We are closest to this injustice and are also the ones closest to the solutions of mitigating this health injustice.”

To further strengthen its broad coalition and community-based advocacy, the Council engages community leaders and organizations at both the state/regional and national levels who are advocating for NHs and PIs.

"Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC) is a national organization that's based on Tongva land and belongs to Oceania. Advocacy is a core part of how we build political power for and with the Pacific Islander community," said Tavae Samuelu, PI-CoPCE Policy Council member and executive director of EPIC. “We strive for policy that reflects our deepest cultural values of responsibility to the land and to each other, recognizing that when we build systems that serve the most vulnerable we will create something that works for all of us.”

The devastating impact of COVID-19 and ongoing disparities experienced by NH and PI communities demonstrates the pressing need of the collective work of the Policy Council.

"The historic lack of access to healthcare institutions of Pacific Islanders and their disenfranchisement of other societal safeguards intended to protect communities was the kindling that fueled the disproportionately devastating effects of COVID-19 on our people. Thus, the difference between surviving and thriving though and after this pandemic is the engagement of Pacific Islander voices in the development of policies that affect them," added Dr. Raynald Samoa national lead of the Pacific Islander COVID-19 Response Team and endocrinologist at the City of Hope National Medical Center. “The PI-CoPCE policy Pillar represents a commitment to stay eternally vigilant in the advocacy of health with our allies to promote essential policy changes required to improve the quality of life of Pacific Islanders everywhere.”

About PI-CoPCE

The Pacific Islander Center of Primary Care Excellence (PI-CoPCE) was established to improve the health of Pacific Islanders in the United States and the U.S. Pacific through primary care support, research, workforce development, and community initiatives. PI-CoPCE is a self-governed, community-based initiative housed within the Association of Asian Pacific Community Health Organizations and is the only national health organization that focuses on and is governed by Pacific Islanders. For more information on PI-CoPCE, please visit www.pi-copce.org.

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