

August 15 Field Hearing  
Testimony on HR 3079

Good morning to all, and to the members of the visiting delegation, welcome to the Northern Mariana Islands. Thank you for the invitation to submit this testimony on House Resolution 3079. My name is Tina Sablan, and I speak to you today as one of many CNMI citizens desiring change in our community through immigration and labor reform. My testimony is based not only on my own experiences having lived in these islands for most of my life, but also on the insights I have gained from the discourse that has been taking place in our community, especially in recent months.

I will begin by stating the obvious: this is a time of great crisis for the CNMI. We face not only an economic crisis, but also a social crisis and a crisis of governance. These three kinds of crises are interrelated, largely of our own making, and inseparable from the dysfunctional immigration and labor system that has persisted in our islands all these years. If any good can come out of our struggles now, it would be that we realize the extraordinary opportunity before us to learn from our mistakes and set ourselves on a path to meaningful and sustainable development.

We in the CNMI have yet to plan for, let alone experience, economic development that truly benefits the entire community. Instead we know too well the consequences of rapid and unrestricted growth. On the whole, this program of growth has suppressed economic opportunities for residents, made nonresidents extremely vulnerable to exploitation, and exerted tremendous pressure on our infrastructure and natural resources. Our local immigration and labor system is at the core of this unsustainable program of growth, and I am convinced that it is also at the core of our economic crisis. An immigration and labor program that is properly funded, well-staffed, and consistently enforced would do much to stabilize our local economy. Although I do not believe that the CNMI has the capacity to establish and maintain such a program on its own – not when it cannot at this time effectively provide even the most basic public services – I do believe that we can and should participate in the development and implementation of this program in cooperation with the federal government.

I would like to shift now to what is perhaps the most polarizing aspect of the immigration and labor issue and that is: the future of long-term nonresidents in the CNMI. There are some who fear that the granting of permanent residency to long-term nonresidents would mean an abrupt mass exodus of our skilled workforce, and on the other hand there are those who worry about the implications of these people staying for good in the CNMI.

In response to concerns about the CNMI suddenly losing its skilled workforce, it has been suggested that qualified long-term nonresidents be required to stay in the CNMI for some period of time before they would be allowed to move elsewhere. Although that decision will ultimately be up to Congress, I personally do not think it would be the right thing to do by these long-term members of our community. If there is work available, if they consider these islands their home and are personally committed to staying here, and

if their employers take care of them, these people will stay. Anyone would stay, for that matter – citizen, permanent resident, or otherwise. But suppose there is no work, or not enough work for the next five years to sustain everyone who would be living here? Under such circumstances, what good does it do for the islands to keep anyone shackled here?

Then there is the alternate fear that granting permanent residency to nonresident workers would result in them staying in the islands for good, and that somehow the indigenous Chamorros and Carolinians will eventually become a marginalized people. I do not share these fears. We are indeed already an incredibly diverse community today compared to what we were 30 years ago, and I do not think that that is a bad thing. In addition to Chamorros and Carolinians, people from all over the world call our islands home, and they bring with them their own skills, ideas, and cultural strengths. I believe that in this time of crisis, we need to pull together and maximize our resources, including the talents of all our people.

I also believe that granting permanent residency to long-term nonresidents would lend still more stability to our local economy because it would help expand the pool of skilled resident workers who are likely to have a vested interest in the community. If this measure is coupled with other provisions to address the economic needs of our current residents – the need for greater vocational and technical training, for example, or for expanded small business assistance, perhaps – I am convinced that at least some of the fears and tensions associated with the status of long-term nonresidents might be alleviated.

This brings me now to the plight of our current residents. I do believe that it is as important to consider the needs of our residents as much as we should the welfare of nonresidents. So many of our people have left the islands in droves out of frustration or desperation, and the ones who remain behind face gloomier and gloomier prospects and increasingly limited opportunities for even basic survival. If nothing changes soon, if the status quo remains the same, I fear that the Chamorros and Carolinians *will* find themselves a marginalized and displaced people – and so indeed, will everyone else who calls our islands home.

In closing, I support House Resolution 3079 because I believe that it fairly balances the diverse needs and aspirations of all people in the CNMI and sets the groundwork for finally addressing the immigration and labor problems that have given rise to an unsustainable economy and an unjust society. I am glad that in addition to addressing concerns related to border protection and human rights, this bill also responds to local appeals for a nonvoting delegate and for special provisions for tourists, guest workers, and investors. I hope to see our local government continue to work closely and constructively with the federal government to ensure the development and implementation of a sound immigration and labor program for the islands that meets both federal standards as well as local needs. I also hope that our efforts today signal the start of a new era of maturity as a self-governing commonwealth in union with the United

States, and that we finally begin to seek meaningful and sustainable development that benefits all our people.

Thank you again for inviting me to be here.