



UAMS Study Finds Marshallese in U.S. Mobilized to Address Pandemic Hardships

By David Wise

April 19, 2022 | FAYETTEVILLE — Faced with material hardships that were intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, Marshallese communities in the United States mobilized to address the issues and help one another.

According to a study by University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences (UAMS) researchers in the Office of Community Health & Research, socially vulnerable groups in the U.S. experienced intensified material hardships during the COVID-19 pandemic, including food insecurity, housing insecurity, inadequate health care and difficulty paying bills.

While hardships increased, the researchers also found that community-based aid increased in response to a heightened need among vulnerable groups. Marshallese communities, the focus of this study, rose to the occasion by providing community support through pre-existing social groups and by forming new groups.

“Family and community are highly valued in Marshallese culture,” said Emily Hallgren, Ph.D., a researcher with the UAMS Office of Community Health & Research. “Marshallese communities in the U.S. are exemplars of community-led response amid crises.”

This cohesive, community-based response helped Marshallese migrants in the U.S. survive during an unprecedented economic and public health crisis. While state and federal aid was often inaccessible or slow to arrive, “Marshallese community groups in Hawaii, Arkansas and Oklahoma mobilized existing community and cultural channels to provide swift, culturally tailored aid to their fellow community members,” explained study co-author Ramey Moore.

“I attribute our success with COVID-19 efforts to our culture,” said Benetick Maddison, assistant director and project specialist for the nonprofit Marshallese Educational Initiative in Springdale. “Although the Marshallese community was not ready for the pandemic’s physical, emotional and mental effects, our people’s cultural values of love, kindness and respect prepared us to work together.”

“It was refreshing to see that although many of us have spent the majority of our lives in the states, our culture of helping one another is still with us, said Eldon Alik, Marshall Islands consulate general in Springdale. “It was this culture that enabled our ancestors to survive those remote tiny islands, sustain the horrors of World War II and overcome the atrocities of the U.S. nuclear weapons testing. It is my firm belief that this culture will also help us get through any crisis in this foreign land.”

The study, [“Pandemic-Amplified Material Hardship and Community-Led Support among Marshallese Diasporic Communities in the United States,”](#) is the first qualitative article analyzing Marshallese migrants’ own accounts of material hardships and community-led relief during the

COVID-19 pandemic.

The study team conducted nine focus group interviews between September and November 2020 with 53 participants, including 36 women and 17 men from Arkansas, Hawaii and Oklahoma. Arkansas and Hawaii have the largest populations of Marshallese living outside the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

Focus group participants described two key themes related to the material struggles of U.S. Marshallese communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. First, participants described amplified difficulties stemming from pandemic-induced job and income loss. Second, community members explained that their material hardships were exacerbated by difficult-to-access federal, state, and employer-based aid.

A dominant theme across all focus groups was the large role played by Marshallese community organizations in providing relief in response to the increased needs of community members during the pandemic. This community-based aid was organized by and for U.S. Marshallese and included churches and religious groups, nonprofits and other Marshallese-identified community groups.

“The pandemic reaffirmed what we’ve always known – that working together will always bring success,” Alik said. “A silver lining amidst all the chaos and sorrows of the pandemic is that it has brought our community closer than before.”

“It is good to know that although we are thousands of miles away from our homeland, living in an individualistic society, we are still a close-knit community,” Maddison said. “Hopefully, this will be our last pandemic, but the community will be ready to help each other again whatever the next crisis is.”

Overwhelmingly, participants described a strong, cohesive response to the rising material need of their fellow Marshallese community members during the pandemic. Many participants expressed pride in the goodness and solidarity their communities displayed during the crisis.

A community leader in Arkansas spoke of a Marshallese women’s group that dedicated their time to help the community: “I’m so proud of this community. Everybody coming together to take part. Every time we ask for volunteers, they’re always there.”

One focus group participant shared that witnessing the Marshallese community come together to help each other during the pandemic reminded her of life back in the Marshall Islands: “It’s the coming together as a community and working together, that’s the positive impact that I’ve noticed, and I really like how everyone is getting closer. It’s like back in the islands.”

One community organization described by participants is a Marshallese women’s group named “Wodde Jippel,” which means, “We will handle things together.” This demonstrates the collective approach that Marshallese take to addressing community hardships. In the pandemic, Marshallese diasporic migrants drew upon long-standing community infrastructure and cultural values to respond to the urgent and increased needs of their fellow community members.

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