ACTIVISM

Resilience in community: Marshallese leaders race to fill gaps in aid amid 'existential threats'

Despite lack of federal attention, the effects of America's nuclear legacy, and climate disasters, Marshallese people still cling to hope for a renewed future.

by **Javan Santos** and by **Joshua Yang** · May 11, 2022

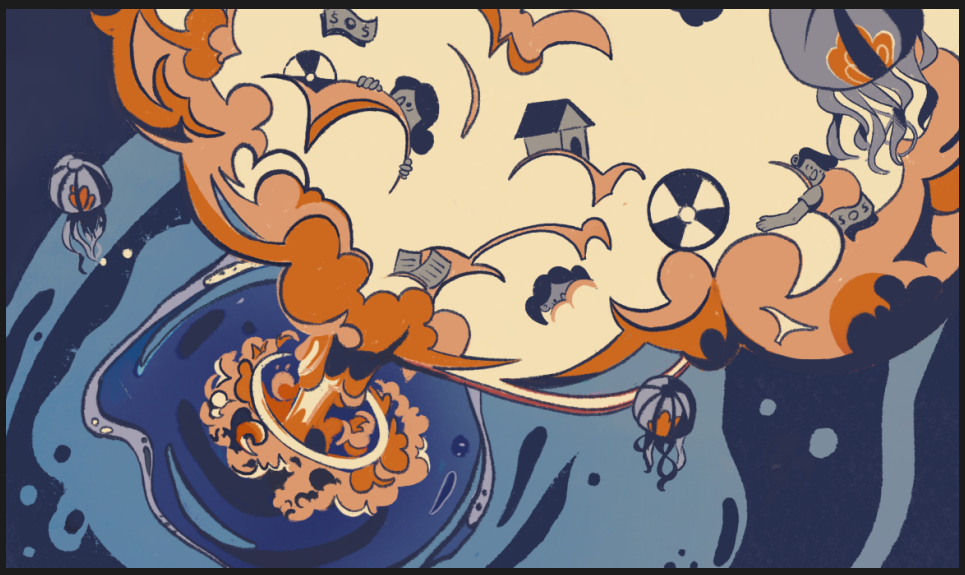

Illustration by Shannon Lin for The Yappie.

EDITOR'S NOTE

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IN THE EARLY MORNING HOURS OF MARCH 30, a tornado with winds of up to 145 mph hit Springdale, Arkansas, a city of nearly 80,000 located in the northwest part of the state. That same morning, the Marshallese Educational Initiative (MEI) set out to work, sending staff into affected regions in conjunction with American Red Cross and other organizations.

"There's been a lot of homes that have been damaged; people are actually trying to get their things together, and we had to pass out food and drinks," said MEI Assistant Director **Benetick Kabua Maddison**, speaking with *The Yappie* minutes after returning from a devastated area. "As far as the needs that the Marshallese community is facing, there's a lot."

A small, Springdale-based nonprofit, MEI only employs seven or eight full-time employees—yet the organization plays a crucial role in serving as a support system for the 15,000 Marshallese migrants who live in northwest Arkansas, one of the largest populations of Marshallese people in the continental United States.

For the organization, providing aid, even in the aftermath of the tornado, is nothing new. Throughout the pandemic, MEI has helped hundreds of families with rent, utilities, and car payments, among other essential needs, according to Maddison.

Although much of MEI's work focuses on addressing the direct needs of Marshallese individuals in Arkansas, the organization's work is rooted in their culture and the issues that continue to trouble their country—an island nation facing a deeply uncertain future.

An archipelago hurt by war and a changing climate

The Republic of the Marshall Islands, a cluster of islands in the South Pacific with a population of roughly 60,000, exists as an independent nation. The country, however, has a long and contentious history of migration to the United States, often as a result of harm the U.S. government inflicts on the Marshallese people's homelands.

American forces took possession of the Marshall Islands under a United Nations strategic trusteeship after World War II and quickly converted them into nuclear testing grounds during the Cold War. Between 1946 and 1958, the U.S. tested and detonated 67 nuclear bombs on the islands or in their waters.

The testing destroyed island ecosystems and exposed the Marshallese people to dangerously high levels of nuclear radiation, which led to a host of illnesses, deaths, and birth defects. The end result was a mass exodus away from the islands, which were unequipped to respond to the enormous health care crisis caused by nuclear testing.

A pure-fission nuclear bomb called "Ivy King" is detonated in the Eniwetok Atoll on November 15, 1952. Photo courtesy of the National Nuclear Security Administration/Nevada Field Office via the U.S. Department of Energy.

All the while, the Marshall Islands were struggling with an existential threat that has only accelerated in the years since: climate change.

Today, the low-lying atolls that make up the South Pacific archipelago average just six feet above sea level; the islands have already suffered a decline in water quality, increased flooding, coral bleaching, and an unprecedented outbreak of Dengue fever, a disease that thrives in warmer conditions.

“The difference between our future at 1.5°C and 2°C is an enormous one; every tiny decimal place counts when you’re as close to the frontlines as we are,” said Marshall Islands Climate Envoy **Tina Stege**, who has represented the nation at previous UN climate conferences.

For the Marshall Islands, climate change and the nuclear legacy are inextricably intertwined. Nowhere is this more apparent than the Runit Dome, an aging concrete cap atop an explosion’s crater located on Enewetak Atoll that currently traps over 3.1 million cubic feet of radioactive waste—the equivalent of 35 Olympic-size swimming pools. It’s the largest cache of U.S. radioactive waste left behind in another country, according to the *Los Angeles Times*.

Yet the Runit Dome was itself a “half-baked solution” to the damage caused by American nuclear testing, according to Stege.

“In 2013, a report from the U.S. acknowledged that cracks were forming [in the Runit Dome] that allow radioactive material to seep into the lagoon and into the Pacific Ocean,” she said.

“The impacts of nuclear testing are still being felt by our communities. The implications for our people’s health, and the health of our environment, have been devastating and continue to be.”

The Runit Dome. Photo courtesy of Steve Holloway via Okeanos Foundation for the Sea.

Such leakage has only been exacerbated by climate change; if rising sea levels fully submerge the Marshall Islands underwater, all 3.1 million cubic feet of waste would be released into the environment.

Under such hostile conditions, Marshallese citizens have left the islands at unprecedented rates. By 2018, a third of the nation's population had been forced to move to the United States.

"Impacts that are being felt today in the Marshall Islands [include] extreme weather and drought; we're also seeing less rainfalls," Maddison said. "People aren't able to grow crops on the outer islands, so climate change plays a big role in people migrating here to the States, as people depend on these crops for financial reasons to support themselves and their families."

Global warming, however, casts a long shadow: members of the diaspora in America continue to suffer from the effects of rising temperatures—and devastating tornadoes are just one example.

"I've lived here in Arkansas since 2001, in Springdale, and this is our first time experiencing [this type of tornado]," Maddison said. "It's gotten a lot warmer over the years compared to, say, 15, 20 years ago."

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The intertwined effects of climate change and nuclear testing have also followed Marshallese to the U.S. Marshallese immigrants exposed to COVID-19 suffer severe disease and die at much higher rates than other populations due to comorbidities stemming from radiation exposure.

"There are about 20,000 Marshallese here in Arkansas; we account for about 3% of the population in northwest Arkansas, and when the pandemic hit, we knew right then that the community would be greatly impacted by COVID-19," Maddison said. "Around May or June [2020], Marshallese accounted for 50% of the deaths in Northwest Arkansas. People were wondering why was it that we had these big [COVID] numbers here in our community. You have to look back at our history—all of these health issues that we've inherited from the nuclear testing program."

Marshallese advocacy organizations such as MEI often grapple with an overwhelming array of injustices with no single, clear solution in sight. During the pandemic, however, the focus for these organizations has been to simply ensure essential needs are met.

Community building in the U.S.

While MEI's efforts focus on direct financial assistance, the Springdale-based Arkansas Coalition of Marshallese (ACOM) works to resolve immigration issues with I-94 forms, which verify the legal status of Marshallese immigrants. Individuals coming from the Marshall Islands often lose their documentation or have discrepancies in their paperwork

that block them from accessing benefits, according to **Michelle Pedro**, a policy advocate and communications specialist at ACOM.

These issues usually arise due to the language barrier and the U.S.'s bureaucratic governmental processes, which are unfamiliar to most Marshallese people. As a result, they are frequently unaware of which documents they need and why. Their unique immigration status also means U.S. government workers don't always know how to assist them.

"If you don't have [an I-94], it's hard for you to apply for a job, it's hard for you to apply for any federal benefits, and it's hard for you to even get your driver's license," she said. "For [missing] I-94s, if we can pull it up from the [Homeland Security online] system, then we can print it out for them. All of our services are free."

For decades, U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency automatically cut off online access to I-94 data 10 years after a Marshallese resident first entered the U.S., the *Honolulu Civil Beat* reports. The agency recently announced that it will update its website this summer so all migrants will be able to access their I-94 cards without a time limit.

ACOM receives anywhere from 25 to 100 requests for immigration assistance per week; the organization's work impacts thousands of Marshallese annually, per ACOM's estimates.

Pedro also helps support Marshallese business owners as part of the Arkansas branch of the nationwide Right to Start campaign.

"I work with business owners and connect them to resources and policymakers to elevate their specific store or business or idea project, because we know that business owners are connected to the community," she said. "With COVID-19, we saw a lot of them either closing up shop, or struggling to be open."

In recognition of the diverse range of needs in their community, MEI, ACOM, and other Marshallese advocacy organizations in Arkansas partnered up to pool their resources and assist members of the diaspora at the outset of the outbreak.

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"With a pandemic, when we knew that this was going to have devastating impact on the community, we contacted the Consulate of the Marshall Islands here in Springdale and asked if we could create a Marshallese COVID-19 task force," Maddison said. "Through that task force, we had Marshallese organizations, organizations where Marshallese work at, and organizations that serve Marshallese community members. We all coordinated efforts to pass out food, pass out essential items to families … [and] coordinate vaccine events in the community."

In the spring of 2020, the Marshallese COVID-19 task force met every week, according to Maddison. After vaccines became widely available, the meetings only occurred monthly, but Maddison emphasized the enduring solidarity among the different organizations.

“We’re very close-knit,” he said. “I mean, it’s just part of our culture.”

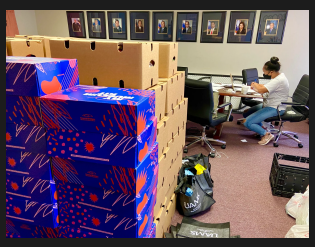
Unique support for unique experiences

The work that MEI, ACOM, and similar groups do—providing access to food, water, shelter, and employment—is essential to the Marshallese community, especially in lieu of consistent, targeted support set aside by the federal government for the Marshallese.

These groups themselves, however, are not self-sustaining and rely heavily on grants. Such funding is inconsistent and often exhausting to actually obtain due to competition and red tape. Moreover, smaller, community-focused organizations have little say in specific grant amounts.

“We are often provided grant monies from larger organizations that have acquired a much larger grant to conduct outreach or research the Marshallese population,” Maddison and MEI Chief Operating Officer **Dr. April Brown** said in a statement to *The Yappie*. “We are usually not consulted in discussions on the front end of grant planning, but rather are offered funding on the back end of the grant once it has already been funded and the use of those funds has already been determined. Ideally, we would be able to seek out grants that meet our needs rather than depend on what is available to us.”





Workers prepare to deliver school supplies, personal protective equipment, and food for the Marshallese community in Arkansas. Photos courtesy of the Marshallese Educational Initiative.

Though both MEI and ACOM have had access to larger amounts of funds due to the federal COVID relief spending, the money will not last forever. If funding packages decrease again, these organizations could be in danger of losing the resources needed to serve their communities.

Maddison also freely acknowledged that initiatives to provide direct financial aid to community members are often stopgap measures that fail to address the root causes behind systemic issues. He pointed to rent assistance as one such example.

“We need better housing laws in Arkansas to protect tenants, not landlords,” Maddison and Brown said. “Arkansas is one of the worst states when protecting tenants’ rights for good and safe housing. Although MEI has assisted numerous families with rent, countless Marshallese families were still kicked out of their homes by landlords during the pandemic.”

Not only is the federal funding model complex and tedious, but it also fails to consider the Marshallese community’s unique challenges and history. As long as the economic,

environmental, and health hazards caused by colonialism and militarization persist in the Marshall Islands, Marshallese people will continue to migrate to the U.S. for what they see as a chance for a better life.

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From classrooms to global summits

In the meantime, Marshallese leaders have devoted significant time to advocacy across a range of audiences.

The Marshallese Educational Initiative, as its name suggests, hosts regular educational sessions in the northwest Arkansas region.

"We've done cultural competency training, where we talk about climate change and share just some of the impacts that are being felt today in the Marshall Islands," Maddison said. "We educate people through these cultural trainings that we have, through speaking engagements that I have, speaking to folks [working] within the nuclear area, speaking to schools, and to just about anybody that's interested in learning about issues that are impacting Marshallese."

Although the pandemic disrupted MEI's speaking engagements, demand has risen once again: Maddison estimates he's conducted 10 to 20 hour-long educational sessions at schools in the past six months, on top of the monthly cultural competency trainings he runs.

On the international stage, one of the most pressing legislative agenda items for Marshallese and Pacific Islander advocacy groups is fast approaching. The Compact of Free Association (COFA), a legal agreement between the United States, Micronesia, Republic of the Marshall Islands, and Palau, allows for free migration between the Pacific Island nations and the U.S. in exchange for American military rights over each South Pacific nation's land—and the existing COFA deal for the Marshall Islands expires in 2023.

LEFT: President Joe Biden walks with Secretary of State Antony Blinken after attending the East Asia Virtual Summit on Oct. 27, 2021. The State Department has been handling COFA talks. Photo courtesy of Adam Schultz via the White House. RIGHT: Federated States of Micronesia President David Panuelo is pictured with Ambassador Joseph Y. Yun, U.S. special presidential envoy for compact negotiations, on April 21, 2022. Photo courtesy of the National Government of the Federated States of Micronesia.

For many Marshallese advocates, including Maddison, the current COFA framework fails to address historical harms perpetrated by the U.S.

"[We] need to have a compact that is based on trust, accountability, and transparency," Maddison said. "Right now, we don't have that type of relationship with the United States, but under the new Compact of Free Association, we hope to see that."

In the most recent round of negotiations, the Marshallese people have made financial claims for the damages from its nuclear legacy, as they have in previous talks. However, the U.S. sees this as a contentious point that brings the possibility of brokering a deal to a halt, according to the Associated Press. The U.S. argues that a settlement from the 1980s absolves the U.S. of further responsibility, though community leaders in the Marshall Islands disagree. Representatives of the Marshallese government say the settlement was nowhere near enough to address the issue.

As the Marshallese government continues to work out acceptable terms with U.S. diplomats, their communities in the U.S. are doing their part as well. MEI and other organizations have conducted significant outreach to elected leaders in calls for a more equitable renegotiation of COFA.

"I had the opportunity of meeting with Congresswoman **Katie Porter** (D-Calif.), [who's] been very supportive of the Marshall Islands these past couple of months," Maddison said. "I raised concerns about the nuclear legacy and the need to address these health and environmental problems that stem from the nuclear testing program."

Their political activism has already yielded fruit: in the fall of 2019, Maddison and other Marshallese leaders lobbied officials in Washington, D.C. to restore Medicaid access for Marshallese citizens, which a drafting error in a 1996 piece of legislation had revoked.

After 25 years without Medicaid—which researchers found led to higher rates of sickness and death—Marshallese migrants had Medicaid access reinstated as part of the second round of COVID-19 relief issued in December 2020. MEI and other Pacific Islander organizations were at the forefront of the effort, which Pedro described as "a hard, hard fight."

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Simultaneous action

Throughout conversations with Pacific Islander leaders, a common thread emerges. The issues the Marshallese community face run a wide gamut, ranging from everyday challenges, such as basic needs in local communities, to existential threats, like climate change and the remnants of the nuclear legacy.

MEI, for example, devotes a considerable share of resources to rent assistance and financial aid, while advocates such as Tina Stege make worldwide appearances on the United Nations stage to call for climate justice.

In Maddison's view, maintaining a focus on community-level and large-scale problems is essential—both components must come together at the same time.

"You get on the ground and you hear concerns from community members, and then [you're able to] advocate for these issues at the national level, representing the voices of the people," he said. "That's both an honor and a privilege, to be representing the people and letting elected officials and other influencers across the country know these are the concerns of our community."

The Marshall Islands. Photo courtesy of the Asian Development Bank via Flickr.

Rebuilding a "powerful nation"

The work Marshallese organizations carry out, however, frequently lacks a large audience. Funding is difficult to secure, and cries for action often fall on deaf ears—such as the uphill battle of attaining recognition for the history of American nuclear testing in the region.

"Not a lot of people here in the U.S. are aware of the nuclear legacy," Maddison said. "It's not in the American history books, despite the fact that it is American history."

As far as international advocacy priorities go, Stege highlighted the lack of finances available for the Marshall Islands to prepare for future climate change effects.

"We need to acknowledge that finance is critical to this," she said. "We need resources to deliver. That's why we've continued to fight for climate finance that reflects the real needs

of vulnerable countries."

Although Stege has achieved actionable results to limit carbon emissions, she understands that destruction from climate change is already inevitable on the Marshall Islands.

"For us, adaptation is part of our national survival—we call our national adaptation plan our national survival plan," she said. "We are working hard at this, carrying out consultations from communities to the world's top scientists, to ensure that it reflects our people's needs."

Despite these challenges, Marshallese leaders still cling to hope for a renewed future.

"I feel like we've been conditioned to hate ourselves, to hate our culture, to think less of ourselves because of colonization," Pedro said. "Even though it happened, we can still redeem ourselves, we can still come up and rise up and become a really powerful nation again."

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