

# House panel vows to help Guam, CNMI with H-2B woes and immigration bill

Haidee V Eugenio, Pacific Daily News Published 4:50 p.m. ChT Feb. 28, 2019

Members of a U.S. House of Representatives committee on Wednesday vowed to help Guam and the CNMI get unfettered access to H-2B visa workers for super Typhoon Yutu recovery, military realignment and long-term economic growth.

They also agreed with Triple J Enterprises Vice President Mike Sablan's testimony that the federal government is often "a distant force lacking a full understanding of the unique situations" that territories face.

"My prayers have been answered," CNMI Del. Gregorio Kilili C. Sablan said as members of the U.S. House Natural Resources Committee expressed support.

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Rep. Louie Gohmert, a member of both the Natural Resources and Judiciary committees, acknowledged that the H-2B situation on Guam and the CNMI is "totally different" from that on the mainland.

"I'm not normally in favor of expanding visas like what we're talking about, but for the Marianas it sounds like a very good idea," Gohmert said at the hearing.

Guam Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero and CNMI Gov. Ralph Torres were among witnesses who testified about the impact of the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's recent ban on H-2B workers from the Philippines and on Sablan's H.R. 560, which seeks to reverse a Trump administration's immigration policy that would separate American families and destabilize the CNMI workforce.



A screen grab of Guam Gov. Lou Leon Guerrero as she addresses members of the full U.S. House Natural Resources Committee on Wednesday. Also in the frame are CNMI Gov. Ralph Torres, left, Leon Guerrero's chief of staff Tony Babauta and the governor's husband, Attorney Jeff Cook. (Photo: Haidee Eugenio/PDN)

"The H-2B issue is really an economic issue and a national security issue for our islands and not necessarily a framework of immigration reform," Leon Guerrero said.

Leon Guerrero asked full Guam and CNMI exemption from the prohibitions in accessing H-2B workers from the Philippines.

## Reversal sought

Torres testified in support of Sablan's bill to help prevent hundreds of people in the CNMI from losing their immigration status by June 29.

Leon Guerrero said while her testimony is mostly on the H-2B issue, she supports the CNMI governor's position on Sablan's bill, which would give permanent CNMI residency status to certain people.

The bill seeks to continue the humanitarian parole programs that have allowed so-called "stateless" people and immediate families of both U.S. and Freely Associated States citizens, to remain in the CNMI beyond June 29.

## 'No workers'

Torres said while millions in federal disaster recovery funds were pumped into the CNMI to rebuild from the massive destruction caused by super Typhoon Yutu, the federal government restricted the islands' access to H-2B workers. The federal ban on H-2B workers from the Philippines applies nationwide. Guam and the CNMI are impacted the most because their workforce and population are small.

Toward the end of the hearing, Leon Guerrero and Guam Del. Mike San Nicolas noted other inequalities that territories face, such as the earned income tax credit payment Guam is required to pay but must pay for. States get reimbursed by the federal government.

"I did bring this up to President Trump and President Trump said to me, 'I think we should pay for this,' so I am here to get my EITC paid," Leon Guerrero said.

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*Reporter Haidee Eugenio covers Guam's Catholic church issues, government, business and more. Follow her on Twitter [@haidee\\_eugenio](#) ([https://twitter.com/haidee\\_eugenio](https://twitter.com/haidee_eugenio)). Follow Pacific Daily News on [Facebook/GuamPDN](#) (<http://www.facebook.com/guampdn/>) and [Instagram @quampd](#) (<http://instagram.com/GuamPDN>).*

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