



KNWA

## 'I think it's really important that this is passed.' Marshallese community group calls for legislature to reevaluate COVID-19 targeted-response proposal

by: Andrew Epperson

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SPRINGDALE, Ark. (KNWA/KFTA) — Benetick Maddison was born in Majuro, the Marshall Islands' capital city. Now, he works as a project specialist for a Marshallese community group in Springdale, and he's doing what he can to help a [minority population that's been disproportionately affected by COVID-19](#).

Maddison said he's surprised the state legislature didn't act last week on a proposal to allocate funding toward a targeted response in Latinx and Marshallese communities.

"We've been trying to put information out there for the community and trying to update whatever it is that the CDC is sharing with the public," Maddison said. "This is a very difficult time for the community. We just want to try to do what we can to lessen the cases here but also save lives."



Benetick Maddison and the Marshallese Educational Initiative provide information and aid to a minority population disproportionately affected by COVID-19.


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I think it's really important that this is passed.' Marshallese community group calls for legislature to reevaluate COVID-19 targeted-response proposal


Last Friday, the state legislature's Arkansas Legislative Council (ALC) declined to suspend its rules to consider the Department of Health's request for \$7 million more in spending authority to provide federal coronavirus relief funds to the Northwest Arkansas Council's Health Care Transformation Division. The proposal outlined more COVID-19 contact tracing and testing for Hispanic and Marshallese communities.

"The Council's proposal will provide comprehensive COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, and case coordination within the Latinx and Marshallese communities in Northwest Arkansas, along with Independence, Randolph, Sevier, and Yell counties," said Nelson Peacock, President and CEO of the Northwest Arkansas Council. "The efforts outlined in the proposal were recommended by the CDC and Arkansas Department of Health. UAMS NW and Community Clinic were asked to coordinate these efforts due to long-standing relationships with leaders and community partners within the Latinx and Marshallese communities of Northwest Arkansas."

Legislators who voted against considering the proposal cited fiscal concerns, lack of clarity or a push for alternative measures as reasons why they made the decision.

 **Robin Lundstrum**  
@RobinLundstrum

Because we already put \$20 million towards the very critical need and another \$16 million in reserves. Very important! So important the job was already started. I think someone is trying to make this political?

 **Mark Cloud** @markcloud  
@RobinLundstrum @RepJimDotson Why did you vote NO today to use FEDERAL money to help aid two minority groups that have been greatly impacted by Covid-19?? #arleg

9:24 PM · Jul 24, 2020

14 See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

 **Bob Ballinger**  
@Bob\_Ballinger

Let's take a look at a couple members of NWA Council.

Walmart = 2019 revenue \$524 billion  
Tyson = 2019 revenue \$42 billion  
J.B. Hunt = 2019 revenue \$9 billion

For perspective, Arkansas's gross revenue as a state was about \$7 billion.

#ARLeg



7:35 AM · Jul 25, 2020

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State Sen. Bob Ballinger (R) said there were too many unanswered questions to sign off on moving \$7 million.

"I think what we're doing right now is a good start," Ballinger said. "Right now, the Dept. of Health is getting engaged, targeting those communities. The governor's put together a task force that is directly vested with the responsibility to figure out ways to reach out to these communities."

Ballinger said he won't shut the door on reevaluating a Northwest Arkansas Council plan in the future.

"Honestly, if the Northwest Arkansas Council can demonstrate that they could do it better than the state of Arkansas could do it, I can relate to that, and we can look at that," Ballinger said. "I'd say what we need to do is start educating people from their standpoint on why the legislature, vested with the appropriations responsibility, needs to invest in them on top of \$40 million that we've already spent for contact tracing."

Other legislators like State Sen. Jim Hendren (R) said they were disappointed they couldn't at least consider the proposal. Hendren said the plan laid out the need for separate contact tracing that's specialized toward Marshallese and Latinx cultures and languages, and this isn't being done through the Dept. of Health.

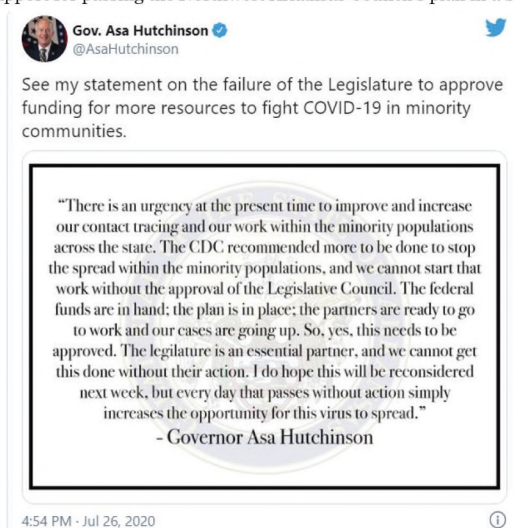


"They gave us a proposal that has been available for five days for members to read, and I visited with the Senate Steering Committee members prior to the ALC meeting," Hendren said. "So, I was somewhat surprised that we refused to approve that."

Hendren said he's in favor of an emergency meeting to take another look at considering and approving the Northwest Arkansas Council's plan, citing the need to act quickly before more cases and deaths engulf the hardest-hit minority communities.

"I don't think we can wait another month, which is the next time the ALC meets to approve these steps," Hendren said. "We're going to have a lot of people infected over the next 30 days, and every day we wait, hundreds more are going to get infected in these populations that are struggling so much. Normally, there's a six-day requirement for the ALC to meet, but we did suspend that rule, so it'll give us the ability to meet [this] week."

Gov. Asa Hutchinson (R) reiterated his support for passing the Northwest Arkansas Council's plan in a Sunday tweet.



"I do hope this will be reconsidered next week, but every day that passes without action simply increases the opportunity for this virus to spread," Hutchinson's statement said, in part.

April Brown is the Marshallese Educational Initiative (MEI) President, and she said the minority population she works with is dealing with a menace in COVID-19, and she agreed with the governor's sentiments.



April Brown is the President of MEI in Springdale. She said better communication is needed to truly gauge the Marshallese community's needs.

"It's the government's obligation to protect its people, protect the population," Brown said. "That should be its first priority. Once everyone gets well, the economy will come back."

In Washington County, 60% of coronavirus-related deaths have occurred in the Marshallese community despite the group making up a small portion of the overall population. Brown attributed this to their work in places like poultry plants, and many Marshallese community members cannot afford to go against the cycle that's been implemented for essential workplaces.

MEI's work has expanded to feeding Marshallese families, aiding in rent payments and providing other services that are strained during the pandemic. [The non-profit works off donations, meaning MEI depends on Northwest Arkansans to be community stewards.](#) Brown said she's appreciated the help since the pandemic began.

"We're overwhelmed by requests, and we're running out of funds," Brown said.

Much of the funding going toward minority communities is being distributed without serious input from the groups that work with Marshallese and Latinx people on a daily basis, Brown said, meaning the targeted responses aren't as direct as they could be.

"There're a lot of good intentions and trying to get money where it's needed," Brown said. "The ones who don't have the agency or the loud voices, they're the ones who aren't heard, but they're the ones who need [aid] the most."

Brown said she hopes to see legislative committee takes another look at the Northwest Arkansas Council's proposal.

"I think it's really important that this is passed," Brown said. "I still don't have a clear answer as to why [this wasn't approved]. The medical experts across the world say this is how you're going to stop [COVID-19]."

Maddison agrees with Brown, and he said something needs to be done before schools resume and the chance for inter-family spread increases.

"It wouldn't make any sense to open up in the first place [without a better response to the virus], but that's something to think about," Maddison said. "I don't know if these officials have really thought it through."