



## Oregon State Archives

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## GOVERNOR VICTOR G. ATIYEH ADMINISTRATION

January 8, 1979 to January 12, 1987

### Biographical Note

Victor G. Atiyeh was born on February 20, 1923 in Portland, Oregon, the son of immigrants from Ottoman Syria. He attended the University of Oregon in Eugene for two years, but dropped out to run his family's Atiyeh Brothers rug and carpet business when his father died. He married Dolores Hewitt in 1944 and they had two children. After World War II, he ran the family business with his twin older brothers as equal partners until he was elected governor in 1978.



Atiyeh's political life took off in 1958 when he ran for a seat in the Oregon Legislature representing Washington County as a Republican focused on business growth and the frugal use of taxpayer money. He won and served as a member of the Oregon House of Representatives from 1959 to 1964 and as a state senator from 1965 to 1978. Atiyeh ran unsuccessfully for governor in 1974 but won against incumbent Governor Robert Straub in 1978, attracting 55 percent of the vote and becoming the first Arab American governor in the country. He was reelected in 1982 by Oregon's largest gubernatorial margin in 32 years.

Working through a time of deep economic recession in the early 1980s, Atiyeh took several measures to diversify and strengthen Oregon's timber-dependent economy. These included reducing workers compensation premiums that were the nation's highest; streamlining Oregon's land use laws; winning legislative repeal of Oregon's controversial unitary-tax formula; launching a worldwide tourism initiative; leading successful international and domestic trade missions; opening Oregon's first overseas trade office in Tokyo; and signing a sister-state agreement with China's Fujian and Taiwan Provinces.

Atiyeh also championed cultural and social causes. He fought for and supported federal legislation designating the Columbia River Gorge as a national scenic preservation area. Atiyeh also showed strong support for historic preservation and the Oregon Arts Commission. His Advisory Committee on DUI was effective in heightening public awareness of the seriousness of the drunk driving problem. The Governor's Commission on Aging sponsored the creation of the Senior Services Division which enabled a more supportive environment for Oregon's older citizens to get necessary care and services. Atiyeh was instrumental in establishing Oregon Food Share, the nation's first statewide food bank. Because of his successful efforts to enact laws against racial harassment, Atiyeh won the Distinguished Public Service Award of Oregon B'nai B'rith and the highest honor for public service from the U.S. Department of Justice.

Over his long career, he earned a reputation for putting the needs of the state ahead of politics, often reminding his staff: "It's amazing how much you can get done if you don't care who takes credit for it."

Atiyeh died on July 20, 2014.