

**KARA
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ASL-ENGLISH-SPANISH INTERPRETER

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Dear Chair Barker and members of the committee,

Thank you for your time and attention in considering the passing of HB 2231 Collective Bargaining for Healthcare Interpreters. When disenfranchised groups fight for equity, and our compatriots struggle to do what is fair and just, it is our representatives who must take the torch and lead the societal shifts that make our cities and state a better place.

My name is Kara DeGiovanni. I am a freelance Spanish interpreter, as well as a freelance American Sign Language interpreter. Interpreting is my sole profession, and I rely on interpreting agencies for all of my work. The Coordinated Care Organizations these agencies have as clients are so large that individual interpreters are unable to contract with these health care systems directly. As a Spanish interpreter, I am able to fit in 4-5hrs of paid work on a good day. The other hours, I spend commuting to and from appointments, unpaid. As an independent contractor, responsible for self-employment taxes, liability insurance, continuing education, car and gas expenses, and more, my \$23/hr income as a Spanish interpreter does not allow me to be financially independent. This was a large motivation in my pursuit to become a sign language interpreter, being that the pay rates and employment terms for ASL interpreters are in line with national standards and allow for a more appropriate and stable income.

HB 2231 as collective bargaining will assist interpreters in achieving industry standards, call for accountability and transparency for all involved parties, and - as a result - improve health outcomes for patients while reducing health care costs.

As it currently stands, **spoken language interpreting agencies do not negotiate terms with independent contractors. They dictate their own terms.** I have completed significant training and education since 2013, all of which exceed the criteria for a national and state qualified interpreter, and I am one exam away from obtaining my national and state health care interpreter certification. In December of 2018, I informed my spoken language agency of three adjustments to my terms: rate increase to \$26.45/hr (below industry standards), 24hr cancellation policy (industry standard), and compensation for full scheduled appointment times (if the agency schedules me for three hours but the appointment lasts one hour, I would be compensated for the full three hours. This is industry standard). I was denied all three, despite spending a month offering compromises, which ultimately ended in one adjustment: an hourly rate of \$25. During that month, the agency withdrew my access to the online portal, where interpreters select jobs, denying me the ability to earn a living during that time.

In comparison, my contractual terms as a Spanish interpreter in Washington DC, where I regularly work, is \$40/hr with 2hr minimum, night/weekend differentials, 24hr cancellation policy, and compensation for the full scheduled time. (The cost of living in DC is only 18% higher, according to Sperling's Best Places.) The working terms for ASL interpreters here in Oregon also reflect the larger industry standard. The terms of my contracts as an ASL interpreter include: standard daytime rate, night/weekend differentials, 2hr minimum OR travel reimbursement, 24-48hr cancellation, and compensation for full scheduled time.

These terms enable me to predict my income, earn a reasonable living, and pay for continuing education and maintenance of my soon-to-be ASL-specific certification. It also allows me time to adequately prepare, study, and practice for upcoming assignments, which is the expectation for all persons working in a practice profession.

HB 2231 will enable interpreters to negotiate clear terms of employment so that we can be prepared for our wide variety of assignments and provide the necessary services to our clients.

Substandard contract terms result in an unskilled workforce.

According to the “2016 Southern Washington and Oregon Language Access Survey” by Oregon Health Care Interpreters Association, amongst health care interpreters in the State of Oregon:

47% have had less than 60hrs of interpreter training (13% have zero training)

62% work less than 20hrs a week

65% earn less than \$22/hr

In the face of poor employment conditions, interpreting becomes a side job, done by family members and untrained individuals who are unlikely to seek and pay for additional training, certification, etc. Unskilled interpreting services also result in mistakes in diagnoses, misunderstandings of care instructions, procedures being performed without truly informed consent, extra tests being ordered “just in case,” compromised confidentiality, cultural misunderstandings, and more.

Despite ORS 413.552 stating “It is the policy of the Legislative Assembly to require the use of certified health care interpreters or qualified health care interpreters whenever possible...” **agencies consistently contract untrained and unskilled interpreters** at woefully low rates compared to national standards, and send these interpreters to work in health care facilities. My agency (and most others) have no oral screening to prove a person’s fluency in both languages, nor any screening to prove their actual interpreting skills. “Lack of competent health care interpreters [prevents] clear and accurate communication and the development of empathy, confidence and mutual trust that is essential for an effective relationship between health care provider and patient.” (OR 413.552).

Spoken language interpreters, including qualified and certified interpreters, have been unsuccessful in negotiating reasonable terms with agencies on an individual basis and thus seek rights to collective bargaining. It is with your support we hope to raise the status and professional standards of the profession in our state, to obtain the employment conditions we deserve, and ultimately improve health outcomes for the many people who rely on our services.

I hope you will join me in support of HB 2231. Committee members have an opportunity to yet again be leaders in social justice, facilitate greater equity, and set a precedent that demonstrates the value not only of interpreters (the overwhelming majority of whom are immigrants), but of the linguistically and ethnically diverse communities we serve.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions you might have. I would welcome the opportunity to discuss with you directly.

Sincerely,

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