



LatinoNetwork

March 30, 2021

**Testimony of Leland Baxter-Neal, Director of Advocacy
Regarding SB 778
Senate Committee on Judiciary and Ballot Measure 110 Implementation**

Dear Chair Prozanski, Vice-Chair Thatcher, and members of the committee:

Latino Network appreciates the opportunity to submit testimony in support of SB 778 to create the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Advancement (OIRA).

Latino Network is a culturally specific nonprofit serving Latinx youth and families in Multnomah, Clackamas, and Washington counties. Our organization provides transformative services to more than 8,000 Latinx youth, families, and community members in multiple areas including education, family stability, housing support, and advocacy.

As the Director of Advocacy for Latino Network, I am responsible for developing, leading, and implementing Latino Network's policy agenda. In this role, I draw on experience and relationships built over a decade of doing immigrants' rights work in Oregon.

This work has included supporting community-led advocacy campaigns; helping intending immigrants navigate the immigration legal system—first as a legal assistant and later as an attorney; providing legal support to individuals seeking asylum, here in Oregon and at family detention centers at the border; representing unaccompanied minors held in a secure facility here in Portland; building and developing community-based immigration legal services programs; coordinating federal litigation; and developing and advancing policy in this building.

It has been my honor to do this work within a vibrant community of advocates who fight to keep our state whole while a broken federal immigration system marginalizes and excludes Oregonians, detains and deports loved ones, and separates families with lifetime banishments from this country.

Some of our best work to create meaningful and long-lasting change is done in partnership with state and local officials. This includes advising and working with law enforcement agencies on improving policies that impact immigrant and refugee Oregonians. It also includes working with our courts and other stakeholders to make our legal system more fair and equitable. And it includes engaging with counties and cities to develop and execute programming that supports immigrant communities

This work can also look like community organizations and coalitions stepping up to fill gaps in government services. A powerful example of the latter is the Oregon Worker Relief Fund, a program designed and driven by community-based organizations to provide economic relief to Oregonians excluded from federal pandemic relief programs. That organization has scaled an initial investment of \$300,000 to more than \$100 million, with every public dollar being provided directly to impacted Oregonians. During this session, we have various bills seeking to secure resources or build programs to serve this community in ways that the State of Oregon has not or cannot do.

Establishing the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Advancement would empower that work for the benefit of all Oregonians by solidifying a constant and reliable partner in our State government.

Other testimony submitted to this Committee has highlighted the clear and profound benefits of securing our state with inclusive policies. It is beyond debate that our state is healthier and safer when all Oregonians, regardless of where they were born, can fully and fearlessly participate in our shared society and civic institutions. The Office of Immigrant and Refugee Advancement would play a much-needed role in ensuring that happens, on a statewide level.

Oregon's advocate community does tremendous work, but it faces some of the same challenges many residents in our state face: a concentration of resources in the Willamette Valley means that rural communities, including regions with strong and populous immigrant communities, cannot always count on the same level of support and advocacy. The Office of Immigrant and Refugee Advancement would play a key and irreplaceable role in building a statewide vision and presence for Oregon's immigrant and refugee communities, ensuring that policies and resources impacting these communities are equitable across county lines.

The establishment of this Office would send a clear and much-needed message that not only are the cultural and financial contributions of immigrant and refugee Oregonians valued, but as people and a community they are valued and they are included.

As the COVID 19 pandemic has utterly disrupted our daily lives, immigrants and BIPOC Oregonians have made up a disproportionate number of our frontline workers, risking their safety so that we all may remain fed and cared for. This sacrifice is reflected in the highly disproportionate COVID infection rates in immigrant and BIPOC communities.

As we chart our course out of this pandemic, we must do so by centering equity and recognizing the contributions and humanity of all Oregonians.

For the reasons above, I urge this Committee to vote in favor of SB 778.