

Chair Patterson, Vice Chair Hayden and members of the committee,

My name is Sonia Landi. I moved to Portland in 2011, from Italy where I worked as a lawyer. I live with my husband and two children. I am an Italian interpreter since 2017, and I am here to testify in support of SB 584.

During the first few years in Portland, I attended multiple doctors' appointments because of my pregnancy first and then for my newborn baby and for my oldest child who is in the autism spectrum, has a developmental disability, speech delay and ADHD.

It was during this period that I learned how challenging was to navigate the American health system. But there was also the painful sensation of feeling helpless when I was told that my oldest child had a disability. Finally, when the self-pity stage was over, I became proactive looking for a way to get something positive out of this situation, while doing something that could be rewarding, and interesting for me. Thus, I decided to become an interpreter, a career where I could utilize my old and new personal and professional expertise while helping others.

So, here I was starting my new adventure, I was pursuing my "American dream"! I thought that with hard work and determination I could be successful, make decent money and feel respected and appreciated for the service I was providing. But, after dealing with some of the language companies and the extremely complicated and equally expensive process of getting Qualified as an interpreter in Oregon, I realized that once again..... I was naïve!

First, let's clarify that Italian is considered a language of lesser diffusion in Oregon. As an Italian interpreter, I provide services for the most vulnerable patients who are interacting with our health care system, mostly elderly people who don't have a family helping them. But there are also Italian citizens who are dependent on Oregon's health care system, because of terminal illness or young couples who travel all the way to Oregon to fulfill their desire of becoming parents with surrogacy. Unlike, for example, a Spanish interpreter that gets multiple appointments in the same day, an Italian interpreter in Portland usually gets only a few appointments on site per month and never more than one appointment on the same day.

Before becoming Qualified, I didn't have any other option but to accept unfavorable working conditions, such as low pay. Often to the point that I ended up losing money, because for a one-hour appointment I receive neither mileage reimbursement nor compensation for the time of travel to and from the clinic. Meanwhile I was paying childcare for my children. But I had to accept these conditions if I wanted the minimum number of hours for my Qualification with OHA.

In addition, there was the economic burden of investing my time and money in submitting drug tests, background checks, lab tests and vaccinations that are REQUIRED by Providers but that interpreters MUST PAY for. This economic hardship is repeated every year and exacerbated by the fees of expensive continuing education courses and certifications.

Now, by comparing my earnings from onsite medical appointments in Portland and how much I spend “every year” to fulfill the required certification, you don't need to be a mathematician to infer that in this equation I end up losing money.

In Italy we have a saying: “ Al peggio non c'è mai fine”. This means that there is never an end to the worst. Indeed, after I got Qualified with OHA in 2019 and then Certified with CoreCHI in 2022 things did get worse for me. Yes, some language companies “finally” recognized a higher hourly rate for my service. Apart from that they are doing everything possible on their hand to discourage me from accepting a medical appointment on site. For example, by a sudden change of policy and refusing to recognize a small bonus for gas expenses even for a one hour appointment. In doing so they are free to assign that appointment to an interpreter who is not qualified or speak Spanish or Portuguese (for Italian speaking patients!). All so they can economize on wages.

That is why I am here today to testify in support of SB 584 and to ask you to please direct OHA to construct an online scheduling portal that would allow providers to directly contract Healthcare interpreters. This will benefit interpreters to set their rates and to focus on Medicaid /OHP patients who are the most vulnerable in our State and will benefit our community by saving taxpayer money because if the providers can contract directly with interpreters, they are going to cut out expenses for intermediaries.

The portal will guarantee that also LEP who speak languages of less diffusion can access Qualified language services.

Because of these unfair working conditions interpreters are disincentivized to continue with this profession, and they quit this career to pursue jobs where they can get better wages, mileage, access to health care without the need of paying for classes to keep their certifications, that is why it is important to establish a “Healthcare Interpreter Fund” so that they are motivated to keep doing this profession.

Of course, I too have been seriously considering that maybe I should quit and pursue a different career. I have already made some major changes by focusing primarily on remote interpretation that suits my family's schedules and needs better while saving on unpaid travel time. However, when I can I like to assist with onsite appointments in Portland and ensure that

also Italian native speakers have access to appropriate language service while navigating our complex medical system.

In conclusion I would like to thank you for listening to me, and I leave you with this thought: If you ask a group of interpreters why they decided to pursue this career, the common denominator in their different answers it is “helping others”, which is the common denominator for politicians too! That is why today I am asking you to “Please say yes to SB 584 so that interpreters can achieve better working conditions while providing an irreplaceable service to their community!”

Thank you