

Submitter: Ginette Smith
On Behalf Of: Linguava
Committee: Senate Committee On Health Care
Measure: SB584

The Honorable Rev. Dr. Deb Patterson
Chair, Oregon State Senate Committee on Health Care

The Honorable Cedric Hayden
Vice Chair, Oregon State Senate Committee on Health Care

Dear Senator Patterson and Senator Hayden,

I am writing to express our strong opposition to Oregon Senate Bill 584, on behalf of our company. This bill, aimed at improving the rates paid to Oregon's health care interpreters and the quality of patient care, unfortunately holds several unintended consequences that would negatively impact Oregonian patients.

As a company deeply committed to promoting linguistic equality in the healthcare industry, we recognize that language access is a fundamental right derived from the 14th Amendment and the Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The provision of high-quality language services to Limited English Proficient patients has been proven to lead to better patient outcomes, higher patient adherence to discharge and prescription instructions, lower hospital readmission rates, and lower rates of malpractice lawsuits.

However, despite the federal mandate for language access, the provision of such services remains largely unfunded and often poorly implemented, especially in light of the linguistic and cultural diversity of the United States and Oregon. The state of Oregon alone saw over 2 million health care interpreting encounters in 2021, for over 150 languages, with over 10,000 encounters in Somali alone. Yet, less than 5% of these encounters were serviced by local interpreters, highlighting the need for a national base of interpreters to meet the linguistic needs of all Limited English Proficient patients.

Unfortunately, the current number of qualified health care interpreters in Oregon falls far short of meeting this need, with only 1000 interpreters available in less than 25 languages. This shortage, coupled with the unfunded mandate for language access and the liability assumed by healthcare providers, puts significant pressure on providers to minimize the cost of language services.

SB 584 will have unintended consequences for Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Deaf Blind and Deaf Disabled patients, limiting their ability to choose their preferred interpreters, and creating a lack of continuity in services which could directly impact the health and well-being of the patient. Selection of interpreters for appointments requiring sign language requires extensive knowledge of and experience with placement of interpreters for the Deaf community to ensure the best possible communication access.

We believe that this bill, while well-intentioned, fails to adequately address these pressing issues by only appropriating a small amount of money to the Oregon Health Authority, leaving the majority of critical functions, such as sourcing and qualification of interpreters, tracking and reporting, and scheduling, under-resourced.

We respectfully urge you to reconsider the provisions of this bill and to engage with stakeholders in the language industry to find a solution that adequately supports the linguistic needs of Oregonian patients and the industry as a whole.