

February 17, 2023

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:

As the largest professional association of interpreters and translators in the United States, many of whom are healthcare interpreters, the American Translators Association (ATA) is the professional home of more than 8,500 members who work in over 90 languages.

We are writing to express our **opposition** to Oregon Senate Bill 584. This bill would task the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) with setting up a web-based platform to support the scheduling and payment of interpreters in healthcare settings in Oregon.

While the spirit of the bill is good, SB 584 fails to take into account the reality of how healthcare interpreting is delivered. All states depend on a national network of interpreters to provide coverage for the more than 300 languages that require interpretation. Due to the shortage of healthcare interpreters in the US, no single state has enough state-based interpreters to cover the federal- and state-mandated language access rights of its Limited English Proficient (LEP), Language Preference other than English (LPOE), and Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DHH) communities. It has [been shown](#) that these communities suffer poorer health outcomes when qualified interpreting is not provided.

In 2021, more than 2 million healthcare interpreting encounters occurred for Oregonian patients in more than 150 languages, in every county of the state. The Oregon registry of interpreters currently includes fewer than 40 languages, meaning interpreters for more than 100 languages needed to be sourced from outside state lines. To satisfy this need, both in Oregon and nationally, most healthcare providers rely on over-the-phone and video remote interpreting services, in addition to onsite interpreting where available. Language service companies (LSCs) can provide qualified, remote medical interpreters within less than a minute of the provider or patient's request. This requires a network and experience that the OHA simply cannot build overnight. Shifting the burden of providing this level of service to the state government without adequate resources could have devastating consequences.

The intended goal behind this bill of improving working conditions and wages for healthcare interpreters is laudable and one that should not be abandoned. However, its scope is limited to the very small percentage of interpreters who provide onsite services in Oregon. It assumes that

on-site interpreters can be legislated separately from remote interpreters. This is not the case. A solution must be found that improves working conditions and wages for both, not for one at the expense of the other. HB 2359, which was signed into law and took effect on July 14, 2021, already requires healthcare providers to work with healthcare interpreters from a healthcare interpreter registry operated by the OHA.

Furthermore, in its current form, this bill will likely result in adverse consequences for Oregonian patients due to the OHA's lack of funding, insufficient language coverage (especially among Indigenous languages), and lack of remote interpreting capabilities. This will result in probable harm instead of ensuring meaningful language access. If it takes effect, it will threaten vital language access in Indigenous and immigrant communities. It will also negatively affect wages and work opportunities for interpreters who work remotely, which is the majority of interpreters today.

This legislation, as currently written, will be a step in the wrong direction for Oregon. It further contributes to a problematic existing wage difference between onsite and remote interpreters by prioritizing onsite over remote.

We urge the Oregon State Senate to carefully consider the complex realities of healthcare interpreting and to take steps to provide meaningful language access effectively, which will result in improved health outcomes for thousands of Oregonians.

We ask that you oppose SB 584 and its amendments as currently written. Instead, Oregon lawmakers should work more closely with healthcare interpreters to draft legislation that builds upon the foundation already laid in Oregon for meaningful language access for the state's most vulnerable residents.

Do not hesitate to contact me for more information.

Respectfully,



Madalena Sánchez Zampaulo
President
American Translators Association