

Date: February 28, 2023

To: Senate Committee on Rules

From: Amelia Pacheco Santos (Collective of Indigenous Interpreters of Oregon)

RE: Support for SB 612 and SB 911

Chair Lieber, Vice-Chair Knopp, and members of the committee,

My name is Amelia Pacheco Santos and I'm a member of the Collective of Indigenous Interpreters of Oregon. I also represent my community of speakers of the Purepecha Language, an Indigenous language native to Michoacán, Mexico.

For many years, the Oregon Legislature has made meaningful strides towards ensuring all Oregonians have the right to understand and be understood. Through the creation of new state programs and investments into quality interpretation services, the experience of many of those who don't speak English as a first language has dramatically improved in a variety of settings.

Unfortunately, there remains a lack of quality interpretation services for those who speak languages that are Indigenous to what is modern-day Mexico, Central America, and South America. This is the result of a few specific and related factors:

1. Limited funding and low pay for quality Indigenous interpretation services. Many entities are hesitant to pay Indigenous interpreters fair wages because of a lack of funding, or Indigenous interpreters are not paid a fair wage due to a lack of credentialing (see the point below); too often, Indigenous Oregonians do not receive interpretation because they or their service provider cannot afford it.
2. The lack of a formal mechanism for Indigenous interpreters to demonstrate proficiency in an Indigenous language, which is a significant barrier to interpreters being able to obtain the credentials needed to provide interpretation in healthcare or judicial spaces, or to advance their professional career.
3. Lack of consultation with indigenous communities in policy and funding discussions related to interpretation.

More than 35,000 Oregonians speak an Indigenous language as their primary language, but the current lack of Indigenous interpretation services all too often results in Indigenous people in Oregon being denied vital care due to language barriers, inability to access critical services or imprisonment and deportation.

It is of great importance to me that members of our communities be able to obtain medical care and other services in their Original Languages. I share the testimony of a member of my community, who does not speak English and his Spanish is limited, due to lack of studies and resources. The community member cannot read or write and their Spanish is very limited. The community member recently had a medical appointment and they provided the service with a Spanish interpreter, they detected a tumor and he could not ask what a tumor was or what exactly the diagnosis was. He arrived at his home crying, he heard the word "tumor" and thought he had a short time to live. I remember that he was very scared. I had the opportunity to share with him that a tumor does not necessarily mean a death sentence, and I offered to help him communicate in his

native language with his medical providers and ask all his questions and concerns. With my assistance, he was able to ask his questions and better understand the medical diagnosis, in his original language. Also with my assistance he was able to complete his medical recommendation and attend all his appointments with the different specialists. His story is just one of many barriers our communities face every day.

I am one of only two interpreters qualified, recognized and registered with the Oregon Health Authority, as an Indigenous interpreter. My process to obtain the qualification was complex to navigate. After submitting the application, I was informed that it was received but additional information was needed, with not a lot of direction or suggestions. I left several voicemails to the team handling my application, requesting call back regarding other options, however there was no response. A meeting was necessary with members of the equity and inclusion office at OHA, for me to express my hurdles to not being able to reach someone in the office. Upon a second and more accurate review of my application, I was given clear and exact information to meet all requirements. To meet criteria, a copy of the following proofs was required, a copy of high school diploma to prove English proficiency, oral test to prove again English and Spanish proficiency, 60 hours of training, from one of their approved trainings, and proof of competency in my indigenous language. I had previously taken an indigenous interpreting training with Katharine Allen, but her training was not approved, therefore it was requested that I translate my certificate in Spanish to English. In addition I had previously taken 30 hours of interpreter training during my role as a community health worker, I was required to send a copy of the letter indicating this 30 hour training had been approved by OHA. Due to no formal testing for Purepecha proficiency, I had to complete lots of research to find someone in my native town that could write me a letter of recommendation. I found a professor teaching at a University in Michoacan, who is fluent in Purepecha, he extended an invite to me, to attend weekly meetings with him and his students, he tested my proficiency during these meetings and granted me to permission add him as reference, finally I had to write a letter of experience. The process was not easy to say the least.

Furthermore, the lack of funding for interpretation has prevented me from exercising my career as an indigenous interpreter, because with the current rates I cannot cover my basic expenses. This prevents me from dedicating myself to interpreting full-time, because I am forced to work other jobs and only be available to interpret when possible.

Fortunately, we have the opportunity to address these issues in this session with SB 612 and SB 911.

SB 911 will establish a commission for Original Peoples from South America, Central America, and Mexico within the Oregon Advocacy Commissions Office, ensuring that Indigenous communities are represented in state government and have a direct voice in policy proposals that concern Indigenous Oregonians.

SB 612 will result in the development of language proficiency evaluation mechanisms for Indigenous languages, allowing interpreters to demonstrate their language skills and obtain formal credentialing. The bill will also allow Indigenous interpreters to be paid a living wage and prevent Indigenous Oregonians from being forced to pay for their own interpretation through a potentially unreliable or unqualified interpreter.

I ask for your support on these important bills!

Sincerely,

Amelia Pacheco Santos