

Date: February 28, 2023

To: Senate Committee on Rules

From: Monica Arce, CNM

RE: Support SB 612 and SB 911

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

My name is Monica Arce, and I am a midwife and the Site Medical Director at the Virginia Garcia Women's Clinic, a federally qualified health center, and community center in Washington County. The clients I serve are mostly recent immigrants, with many barriers to care. I was raised in Peru, and I am bilingual and an immigrant myself, and my first working years after college were spent as an interpreter, until I went back to school to become a midwife. I have served this community for my entire adult life, first as an interpreter and then as a midwife for a total of 29 years. This experience has made me particularly sensitive to the issue of barriers to indigenous interpreter services.

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. A lack of consultation with Indigenous communities in interpretation-related policy and funding discussions;

Over 35,000 Oregonians speak an Indigenous language as their primary language, but the current lack of Indigenous interpretation services too often leads to Indigenous Oregonians being denied life-saving care due to language barriers, an inability to access critical services, or imprisonment and deportation. In our service area, we have a large population of indigenous recent immigrants from Central America, what speak multiple different indigenous languages, and finding adequate, timely and accurate interpretation in their language can be nearly impossible.

In my line of work, when babies are arriving at all times of the day and night and medical needs arise without being able to schedule things ahead of time, the gap in interpreter services for this population is very sorely felt. Labor starts whenever it starts, and our patient's needs can't be foreseen to be able to serve them adequately. My ability to serve this population has been severely hindered by the barriers in our system to provide interpretation.

Thankfully, we have the opportunity to tackle this problem this session with SB 911 and SB 612. SB 911 will establish a commission for Original Peoples from South America, Central America, and Mexico within the Oregon Advocacy Commissions Office, ensuring that the voices of 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.

Sincerely,

Monica Arce, CNM

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