

Date: February 28, 2023  
To: Senate Committee on Rules  
From: Cameron Coval (Pueblo Unido PDX)  
RE: Support SB 612 and SB 911

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

My name is Cameron Coval and I am the executive director of Pueblo Unido PDX, a nonprofit that connects immigrant communities with legal, social, and Indigenous language interpretation services.

I co-founded Pueblo Unido in April 2017 to help community members navigate complex legal and social service systems and overcome financial, technological, literacy, and linguistic barriers. Our work aims to ensure access to essential human rights and services so that our communities can be safe, feel supported, and thrive.

Oregon is home to more than 35,000 individuals that speak an Indigenous language from Mexico, Central America, or South America as their primary language. These individuals are among those most impacted by environmental disasters, disease pandemics, housing insecurity, and discrimination. They are also among those who face the most significant barriers to essential services and social inclusion.

Access to Indigenous language interpretation is indispensable to the work we do. Whether we are connecting community members to legal aid, low-income tenants to housing assistance, individuals impacted by the pandemic to COVID relief funds, or survivors of domestic violence to trusted advocates, our staff and clients must have access to Indigenous language interpretation in order for our work to be possible, trauma-informed, and effective.

Despite its paramount importance, however, none of our statewide systems reliably provide services or interpretation in Indigenous languages. The need for, and lack of, Indigenous language interpretation became so pressing for our organization and our communities that in 2019 we began convening meetings with Indigenous interpreters to discuss potential solutions. The conclusion was that there needed to be a Collective, led by and for Indigenous interpreters, to provide language access for Indigenous community members and ensure professional development opportunities and living wages for Indigenous interpreters.

In the following months, Pueblo Unido began supporting the formation of the Collective of Indigenous Interpreters of Oregon. We have since recruited more than 20 interpreters of the Akateko, Chuj, Ixil, K'iche', Mam, Mixteco, Purépecha, Q'anjob'al, Q'eqchi', and Zapoteco languages, and offered a 63-hour foundational training curriculum designed specifically for Indigenous interpreters. Since the Collective's formation, members have provided Indigenous language interpretation during more than 300 appointments in legal, health, and community settings.

Despite our best efforts, however, Indigenous interpreters continue to face a myriad of challenges to advancing their careers in the interpretation field and meeting the needs of all Oregonians who speak Indigenous languages.

During our bi-weekly meetings of the Collective, members have shared experiences of being asked to provide their services for free or under-valued rates by service providers who claimed they did not have funding to cover interpretation costs, or by Indigenous language speakers who said that they were expected to cover the cost for their own interpretation.

Members have also shared that in some settings, service providers have scheduled interpretation appointments with them but then expected interpreters to show proof of credentialing before providing interpretation. However, it was not possible for the interpreters to obtain such credentialing because the required trainings were offered exclusively in English (and were therefore inaccessible to interpreters who are fluent only in Spanish and Indigenous languages), or because the interpreters were required to provide proof of proficiency in their Indigenous language(s), despite the fact that no such proficiency exams exist in Oregon for their languages.

After countless instances of being underpaid and expected to demonstrate credentials that are not possible for them to obtain, members have been left with feelings of exasperation, exclusion, and discrimination. Without the ability to earn a livable income through interpretation, and the constant feeling of exclusion, many have opted to pursue careers in other fields, which limits their ability to provide interpretation.

These consequences are not felt exclusively by Indigenous language interpreters. The negative impacts are acutely felt by Oregonians who, without reliable access to Indigenous language interpretation, are too often being denied life-saving medical care, unable to access critical services and information, and are wrongly imprisoned and deported. The impacts are also felt by Oregon's service providers, executive branches, and state agencies who need Indigenous language interpretation in order to effectively do their work and comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, the Patient's Bill of Rights, and due process protections.

One of the most egregious and notorious examples of these consequences in Oregon occurred in 1986, when Santiago Ventura Morales was wrongfully convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison in Clackamas County. Mr. Ventura Morales spoke Mixteco as his first language, but was provided only a Spanish interpreter during his trial. After serving more than four years in prison, Mr. Ventura Morales's conviction was ultimately overturned and he was released after Governor Goldschmidt issued a pardon.

Unfortunately, the civil and human rights of Oregonians who speak Indigenous languages continue to be violated to this day due to a lack of language access. As recently as March 2022, for example, healthcare providers from Virginia Garcia Women's Clinic and Legacy Health testified during a public hearing with the Oregon Health Authority that, due to the inability to find Indigenous

language interpreters, they have been unable to complete patient intakes and examinations, deliver instructions for taking medications, or effectively serve patients in urgent and emergency care settings. Similar situations play out each day across the state in a variety of legal, medical, and social service settings.

These problems remain unaddressed and these communities remain underserved because Indigenous peoples from Mexico, Central America, and South America are not adequately represented in state government or consulted about interpretation-related policy and funding discussions. As a result, decisions are made that unintentionally further the exclusion of Indigenous language interpreters, and perpetuate the language access gap for Indigenous communities.

To help the State of Oregon begin to address these issues moving forward, Pueblo Unido and the Collective of Indigenous Interpreters of Oregon have developed two bills, SB 612 and SB 911.

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 interpreter credentialing. The bill will also prevent Indigenous Oregonians from being forced to pay for their own interpretation.

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 peoples from these regions are represented in state government and have a direct voice in policy proposals that concern their communities.

We strongly urge the Legislature to take these steps to support language access and incorporate the voices of Indigenous communities.

Sincerely,

Cameron Coval  
Executive Director  
Pueblo Unido PDX