



Standing for dignity in the workplace

Testimony in Support of SB 612 and SB 911
March 1, 2023

Chair Lieber, Vice-Chair Knopp, and members of the Senate Rules Committee,

My name is Kate Suisman. I am an attorney at the Northwest Workers' Justice Project (NWJP). Thank you for the opportunity to give testimony on these important bills. We represent workers in low-wage jobs when bad things happen to them at work: when they are not paid, or are discriminated against for being in a protected class or are retaliated against for speaking up. Finally, we engage in policy advocacy and try to bring the important perspectives of workers in low-wage jobs and immigrant workers to these policy discussions.

We strongly encourage your support of SBs 612 and 911 to even the playing field for Oregonians who speak languages indigenous to Mexico, Central and South America. Many of our clients are immigrants who speak an indigenous language as their first language. While some also speak Spanish to varying degrees, there is no replacement for dealing with life's many challenges in your preferred language. We, as attorneys, have realized that our indigenous-speaking clients need to communicate in their own language to participate fully in their legal cases, and receive the same level of service we offer to our Spanish and English-speaking clients. But there are not enough indigenous interpreters currently available. We have struggled to find interpretation services in a number of indigenous languages- Mam, Kanjobal, Maya and others. I was even asked to bring my own interpreter to a BOLI civil rights interview for a Kanjobal-speaking client, a request I declined and informed the agency it was their responsibility to make their process accessible to workers who speak languages other than English. We need to do better.

We need 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.

Please join community members, advocates and workers in support. Thank you very much.