

Joint Committee on Ways and Means

April 28, 2023

Testimony in support of HB 3555 & SB 612

Co-chairs Steiner and Sanchez, and members of the committee,

My name is Maria Romero and live in Ontario. I work at the Oregon Law Center office in Ontario.

One of the low-income communities we serve is the migrant and seasonal farmworker population. I have worked for the Oregon Law Center for 43 years. I have witnessed and seen the farm labor camps/housing diminish. As we serve the FW community members with the difficulty of not being able to find or qualify for FW housing, some of the issues we have heard are families having to live in unfinished garages, unfinished basements, family of 6 having a one bedroom rented from another family. A mother worried that she cannot leave her daughters by themselves because of the other people that live in the house. Seeing the desperate need of housing for their families, is very difficult. In Malheur County there is one FW based complex in Nyssa. In Ontario there is one Apartment Complex that is not based on status, but again is very difficult to obtain an apartment.

Ontario is an agricultural heavy community and farmworkers in our state are a critical workforce and contribute in immense ways to the vibrancy of our state. However, farmworkers and their families encounter unique challenges that make it extremely difficult to achieve economic security, stability, and prosperity. They earn low wages, oftentimes have limited or no access to healthcare, encounter language barriers in accessing resources and programs, and housing instability. Farmworkers were some of the hardest hit workers in the pandemic with high infection rates. The current housing instability and skyrocketing cost of living are driving many, especially farm workers and their families, to make hard choices.

Today I would like to highlight two important investments that would benefit farmworkers and their families tremendously. I strongly urge this committee to fully fund HB 3555, a \$10 million investment to develop community-based housing for farmworkers. This innovative housing model is a priority for our farmworkers because it is not isolated on-farm, affordable, and connected to the community.

Safe and healthy housing is vital to building thriving and resilient communities. In this housing crisis, farmworkers are one of the communities hardest hit and often have very limited housing options. I strongly urge this committee to prioritize this investment.

Finally, I strongly urge this committee to support and fund SB 612 which establishes the Indigenous Languages Fund. Many farmworkers we encounter in the fields and in community settings speak Mesoamerican indigenous languages such as Mam, Mixtec,

Zapotec, Purepécha, and Nahuatl. Language access in the form of quality interpretation services is a key part in ensuring farmworkers can access services in a language they understand. The lack thereof results in Indigenous Oregonians potentially being denied life-saving medical care, unable to access critical services, or being wrongfully imprisoned and deported.

As we continue into a time of economic uncertainty and potential budget cuts, I respectfully request the Ways and Means committee focus their attention on protecting the needs of those who have been historically underserved by the statewide systems that are currently in place.

Thank you for your time, coming to Ontario, and supporting the needs of our rural communities.

Maria Romero