

To: Senate Committee on Health Care  
From: Bradley Owen, Oregon Interpreters in Action  
Re: Support for Statewide Health Care Interpreter Portal

Dear Chair Patterson, Vice-Chair Hayden, and members of the Committee,

My name is Bradley Owen and I have been a certified health care interpreter in Vietnamese for over seven years. I enjoy the job because it's a chance to use and improve my language skills, learn more about medicine, help others who are vulnerable, and to feel proud of the impact I have on the community.

Language barriers have a huge impact on health care outcomes for non-English speakers. Many LEP patients come from cultures where it's unacceptable to speak to the doctor and participate in their own healthcare. Many of these patients do not have beyond an elementary school level of education. Every card in the deck is already stacked against them. Having the language barrier multiplies the consequences. And yet across the U.S., and especially in Oregon, the industry of healthcare interpreting is a race to the bottom. The language companies make the profits, while the healthcare interpreters work for sometimes less than nothing. Sometimes they work for negative income. Patients and interpreters suffer negative outcomes because of that. That costs the community unnecessarily.

No one can do this work as a career, despite the growing need for our services. The pay for most Qualified and/or HCI/NMCMCI certified medical interpreters is less than half that of a state certified court interpreter (several times less than a federally certified court interpreter). In our profession, many people rely on food stamps and medicaid to make ends meet. Many interpreters not only end up working for such a low hourly rate that they aren't making any money after expenses, but are actually losing money.

We know that this work is so important to quality health care access for non-English speakers, which is part of the reason why many people do it even though they know they are being exploited, which hurts the industry even more. Language companies know how to pull and tug on the interpreters' heart strings, and it's unfair. As a skilled, experienced, passionate and professional interpreter - this is why I left the industry and refuse to participate until it is fixed. I choose to advocate for our profession while working in a different industry that will pay my bills and provide for my family. Even minimum wage jobs pay better than medical interpreting.

The model needs to be redesigned to reflect the measures our union is proposing, which more closely align with the long-standing and much more successful model of court interpreting. We need to acknowledge the fact that quality, certified medical interpreting is a matter of life and death for many LEP patients, and make this a viable career option for people.