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# A STRONG VOICE FOR OREGON'S WORKERS

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TO: Chair Hartman  
Vice-Chairs Nguyen and Scharf  
Members of the Committee  
FR: Catie Theisen, Oregon AFL-CIO  
RE: HB 2976 Indigenous Language Justice Support

March 18, 2025

The Oregon AFL-CIO represents 300,000 workers across Oregon and is a voice for all workers in the legislative process. HB 2976 takes an important step at making sure that all Oregonians – regardless of the language they speak – can access critical state services in a language they clearly understand.

1 in 8 workers in Oregon is an immigrant<sup>1</sup> -- many of whom continued to work round-the-clock during COVID-19 to keep food on our tables, to care for our loved ones, and to keep our economy running. But Oregonians who are immigrants and refugees continue to face barriers to accessing state services because of a lack of services in languages other than English, or even Spanish.

Indigenous language interpreters – specifically those who speak languages of what is modern-day Mexico, Central and South America – do exist, but because there are not recognized certification methods and communities are not meaningfully engaged, they are under utilized and under compensated for their labor.

Over 35,000 Oregonians speak an Indigenous language of modern day Mexico, Central and South America as their primary language, but the current lack of Indigenous interpretation services too often leads to Indigenous Oregonians being denied life-saving care s, an inability to access critical services, or imprisonment and deportation.

With limited exceptions, credentials are required by some state entities to provide interpretation services. But, in order to obtain a credential, an interpreter must demonstrate they are qualified. The best way to demonstrate qualifications is by passing a formal language proficiency exam. These exams don't currently exist for many Indigenous languages from these regions, which hinders the ability of interpreters to provide their services in a variety of settings.

HB 2976 would allocate funding to develop language proficiency evaluations, recruit and retain a qualified workforce, and coordinate appointments across many different entities, helping remove significant barriers for individuals needing interpretation services in some of life's most critical moments.

This bill is simply a continuation of the work that the Oregon Legislature has already done towards ensuring all Oregonians have the right to understand and be understood. We encourage your support of HB 2976 and look forward to continuing to partner with you to make sure that all Oregonians can meaningfully and equitably access critical state services.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/research/immigrants-oregon>