

Date: February 28, 2023

To: Senate Committee on Rules

From: Ginger Gouveia (Acompañar, Lincoln County, Oregon)

RE: Support SB 612 and SB 911

My name is Ginger Gouveia and I represent Acompañar, a community volunteer group supporting the needs of our Guatemalan immigrants in Newport and Lincoln County. Many of our immigrants are asylum seekers who have left their villages because of violence and environmental disaster.

The economic base in Lincoln County is tourism, hospitality industries, fishing and fish processing plus agriculture. These are typically low paid positions and are more often than not filled by our immigrant community. Guatemalan immigrants are an integral part of our community but language barriers often prevent them from access to critical services.

Most of our families speak the Indigenous language of Mam with limited Spanish skills. Mam has no written language therefore oral interpretations services are imperative. Unfortunately there are no interpretation services for Indigenous Mam speakers in our area. And, if there were, it would be cost prohibitive for our families. I am sure that other small communities in the state face the same dilemma.

I would like to share about the challenges that our Indigenous community has faced to obtain a driver's license. Due to language barriers and the lack of Indigenous interpretation services in our area, most Indigenous community members have been unable to pass the learners permit test. We have struggled for over a year and a half to find a way of assisting them with that effort. The permit manual is written in Spanish, but most do not read Spanish adequately. DMV does have oral interpreters available in many languages but not Central and South American Indigenous languages. We all know that the DMV test is sometimes confusing even for an English speaker and without an Indigenous language interpreter it is almost impossible for many in our community to pass the test. Some may try three or four times and after failing, finally give up and drive without a license. This leads to traffic stops, sizable fines, and very expensive auto insurance for our community members. At this time Acompañar is working with Arcoiris Cultural to provide oral classes in Mam but the individuals still face the fact that they do not have a Mam interpreter available at DMV.

Fortunately, we have the opportunity to tackle these problems this session with 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 credentialing. The bill will also allow Indigenous interpreters to be paid a living wage and prevent Indigenous Oregonians from being forced to pay the high cost for their own interpretations.

Passage of SB 612 would mean that the Mam speakers in our community would have access to the interpretation they need to pass the learners permit test and obtain a driver's license. Moreover, by eliminating barriers and ensuring living wages for Indigenous interpreters, SB 612 could offer a future career path for the many children in Lincoln County who speak Mam, Spanish, and English. This would benefit the individuals and the community.

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 communities are represented in state government and have a direct voice in policy proposals that concern Indigenous Oregonians. This commission could help state lawmakers and policymakers identify and address the language gaps present in our statewide systems, including the DMV.

I urge your support of bills SB 612 and SB 911!

Sincerely,

Ginger Gouveia