



Date: February 27, 2023
To: Senate Committee on Rules
From: Natalie Webb & PCC CLEAR Clinic
RE: Support SB 612 and SB 911

Chair Lieber, Vice-Chair Knopp, and members of the committee,

My name is Natalie Webb and I represent the PCC CLEAR Clinic, which offers limited scope legal services, including immigration services, to community members in need.

In recent years, the Oregon Legislature has made meaningful strides towards ensuring that all Oregonians have the right to understand and to be understood. Through the creation of new state programs and investments into quality interpretation services, the experience of many of those who don't speak English as a first language has dramatically improved in a variety of settings.

Unfortunately, there remains a lack of quality interpretation services for those who speak languages that are Indigenous to what is modern-day Mexico, Central America, and South America. Over 35,000 Oregonians speak an Indigenous language as their primary language, but the current lack of Indigenous interpretation services too often leads to Indigenous Oregonians being denied life-saving care due to language barriers, an inability to access critical services, or imprisonment and deportation.

The PCC CLEAR Clinic provides services to clients who speak many different languages from various corners of the world. Too often, the languages that prove most challenging to find quality interpretation services for are Indigenous languages spoken around Central and South America. Our clients come to us seeking relief from deportation, assistance with claims for asylum, and guidance in applying for work authorizations to support their families. Too often, the greatest obstacle in their path is not the merits of their claim or the letter of the law, but rather the inability to be understood by not only our office but also by the Immigration Court, USCIS, and by other community resources that attempt to aid them.

Providing services to Indigenous-language speaking clients with such limited interpretation resources at our disposal takes nearly double the time allotted for an English or Spanish speaking client. Appointments are frequently rescheduled simply because we are unable to find interpreters when we need them. Coordinating an interpreter's limited schedule with both the client's and our attorneys' availability adds days, if not weeks, to our processes. The result of these delays makes the already stressful process of navigating our immigration system even more terrifying. Deadlines that may make or break an individual's case for legal status can be missed through no fault of the client. What should be an opportunity for them to tell their story in their own words becomes dictated entirely by forces outside of their control.

This lack of Indigenous language interpretation resources is the result of a few specific and related factors:

1. Limited funding and low pay for quality Indigenous interpretation services. Many entities are hesitant to pay Indigenous interpreters fair wages because of a lack of funding, or Indigenous interpreters are not paid a fair wage due to a lack of credentialing (see the point below); too often, Indigenous Oregonians do not receive interpretation because they or their service provider cannot afford it.
2. The lack of a formal mechanism for Indigenous interpreters to demonstrate proficiency in an Indigenous language, which is a significant barrier to interpreters being able to obtain the credentials needed to provide interpretation in healthcare or judicial spaces, or to advance their professional career;
3. A lack of consultation with Indigenous communities in interpretation-related policy and funding discussions;

Thankfully, we have the opportunity to tackle these problems this session with SB 911 and SB 612.

SB 911 establishes 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 provides for 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.

We at the PCC CLEAR Clinic urge you to support each of these important bills, to provide our community members the opportunity to have their voices heard and their stories told.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Natalie Webb". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being more prominent.

Natalie Webb

On behalf of the PCC CLEAR Clinic

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