

Date: February 28, 2023

To: Senate Committee on Rules

From: Isa Peña, Innovation Law Lab

RE: Support SB 612 and SB 911

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

My name is Isa Peña. I am the Director of Strategy at Innovation Law Lab, an Oregon-based nonprofit fighting for immigrant and refugee justice, and a member of Oregon Worker Relief (OWR), a statewide coalition striving to solve the exclusionary impacts faced by our immigrant and refugee communities in Oregon.

For many years, the Oregon Legislature has made meaningful strides towards ensuring all Oregonians have the right to understand and 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. This 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;

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. Through our work with Equity Corps of Oregon and Oregon Worker Relief, we have been able to serve our indigenous language speakers and have needed interpretation services from indigenous language interpreters in ~16-18% of the people we serve. Through SB 612 and SB911 we have the opportunity to tackle this problem.

SB 911 will establish 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 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 for their own interpretation through a potentially unreliable or unqualified interpreter.

I urge your support SB 612 and SB 911.

Sincerely,

*Dora L. Pena*