

Date: April 8, 2023

To: Senate Committee on Ways and Means

From: Cameron Coval (Pueblo Unido PDX)

RE: Support SB 612 and SB 911

Co-Chair Steiner, Co-Chair Sanchez,, and members of the committee,

My name is Cameron Coval and I am the executive director of Pueblo Unido PDX, a nonprofit that connects immigrant communities with legal, social, and Indigenous languages to interpretation services.

I co-founded Pueblo Unido in April 2017 to help community members navigate complex legal and social service systems and overcome financial, technological, literacy, and linguistic barriers. Our work aims to ensure access to essential human rights and services so that our communities can be safe, feel supported, and thrive.

Oregon is home to more than 35,000 individuals that speak an Indigenous language from Mexico, Central America, or South America as their primary language. These individuals are among those most impacted by environmental disasters, disease pandemics, housing insecurity, and discrimination. They are also among those who face the most significant barriers to essential services and social inclusion.

Access to Indigenous language interpretation is indispensable to the work we do. Whether we are connecting community members to legal aid, low-income tenants to housing assistance, individuals impacted by the pandemic to COVID relief funds, or survivors of domestic violence to trusted advocates, our staff and clients must have access to Indigenous language interpretation in order for our work to be possible, trauma-informed, and effective.

Despite its paramount importance, however, none of our statewide systems reliably provide services or interpretation in Indigenous languages from the aforementioned regions. The need for, and lack of, Indigenous language interpretation for languages from Mexico, Central, and South America became so pressing for our organization and our communities that in 2019 we began convening meetings with Indigenous interpreters to discuss potential solutions. The conclusion was that there needed to be a Collective, led by and for Indigenous interpreters, to provide language access for Indigenous community members and ensure professional development opportunities and living wages for Indigenous interpreters.

In the following months, Pueblo Unido began supporting the formation of the Collective of Indigenous Interpreters of Oregon. We have since recruited more than 20 interpreters of the Akateko, Chuj, Ixil, K'iche', Mam, Mixteco, Purépecha, Q'anjob'al, Q'eqchi', and Zapoteco languages, and offered a 63-hour foundational training curriculum designed specifically for Indigenous interpreters. Since the Collective's formation, members have provided Indigenous language

interpretation during more than 300 appointments in legal, health, and community settings. Despite our best efforts, however, Indigenous interpreters continue to face a myriad of challenges to advancing their careers in the interpretation field and meeting the needs of all Oregonians who speak Indigenous languages.

During our bi-weekly meetings of the Collective, members have shared experiences of being asked to provide their services for free or under-valued rates by service providers who claimed they did not have funding to cover interpretation costs, or by Indigenous language speakers who said that they were expected to cover the cost for their own interpretation.

Members have also shared that in some settings, service providers have scheduled interpretation appointments with them but then expected interpreters to show proof of credentialing before providing interpretation. However, it was not possible for the interpreters to obtain such credentialing because the required trainings were offered exclusively in English (and were therefore inaccessible to interpreters who are fluent only in Spanish and Indigenous languages), or because the interpreters were required to provide proof of proficiency in their Indigenous language(s), despite the fact that no such proficiency exams exist in Oregon for their languages (both OHA and OJD require interpreters to obtain some form of a credential in order to provide interpretation services in their respect settings).

After countless instances of being underpaid and expected to demonstrate credentials that are not possible for them to obtain, members have been left with feelings of exasperation, exclusion, and discrimination. Without the ability to earn a livable income through interpretation, and the constant feeling of exclusion, many have opted to pursue careers in other fields, which limits their ability to provide interpretation.

These consequences are not felt exclusively by Indigenous language interpreters. The negative impacts are acutely felt by Oregonians who, without reliable access to Indigenous language interpretation, are too often being denied life-saving medical care, unable to access critical services and information, and are wrongly imprisoned and deported. The impacts are also felt by Oregon's service providers, executive branches, and state agencies who need Indigenous language interpretation in order to effectively do their work and comply with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, the Patient's Bill of Rights, and due process protections.

One of the most egregious and notorious examples of these consequences in Oregon occurred in 1986, when Santiago Ventura Morales was wrongfully convicted of murder and sentenced to life in prison in Clackamas County. Mr. Ventura Morales spoke Mixteco as his first language, but was provided only a Spanish interpreter during his trial. After serving more than four years in prison, Mr. Ventura Morales's conviction was ultimately overturned and he was released after Governor Goldschmidt issued a pardon.

Unfortunately, these types of issues continue to persist today, largely due to a lack of language access. As recently as March 2022, for example, healthcare providers from Virginia Garcia Women's Clinic and Legacy Health testified during a public hearing with the Oregon Health Authority that, due to the inability to find Indigenous language interpreters, they have been unable to complete patient intakes and examinations, deliver instructions for taking medications, or effectively serve patients in urgent and emergency care settings. Similar situations play out each day across the state in a variety of legal, medical, and social service settings.

Part of the reason that these problems remain unaddressed and these communities remain underserved is because Indigenous peoples from Mexico, Central America, and South America have not been adequately represented in state government or consulted about interpretation-related policy and funding discussions. As a result, decisions are sometimes made that unintentionally further the exclusion of Indigenous language interpreters, and perpetuate the language access gap for Indigenous communities from these regions.

To help the State of Oregon begin to address these issues moving forward, Pueblo Unido and the Collective of Indigenous Interpreters of Oregon have developed two bills, 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 interpreter credentialing. The bill will also help prevent Oregonians who speak a language of lesser diffusion from being forced to pay for their own interpretation.

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 peoples from these regions are represented in state government and have a direct voice in policy proposals that concern their communities.

We strongly urge the Legislature to support language access by passing SB 612 and SB 911.

Sincerely,

Cameron Coval
Executive Director
Pueblo Unido PDX