

Esteemed chair Patterson, vice-chair Hayden, and members of the committee,

For the record my name is Felicity Ratway. I am a certified health care interpreter and I'm here to urge you to vote yes on SB 1578.

I have been interpreting in Oregon since 2015, and hold a Master's degree in Interpreting and Translation Studies from Wake Forest University. I also serve on the Oregon Council on Health Care Interpreters and research interpreting in health care as a health policy PhD student. I care deeply about my work. However, I struggle to stay afloat due to inconsistent work, pay, and working conditions in the profession. I am only able to continue because I supplement my health care interpreting income with other jobs—conference interpreting, a graduate research assistantship, language access consulting work, and a leadership role at a non-profit.

Health care interpreters have few protections when we are mistreated, and little say in our working conditions. This has led to extremely high turnover—the renewal rate for health care interpreters hovers around 8% in our state.

Though we often cover jobs that are paid for with state dollars, we are not often hired directly because there is no efficient way for the state to book us, track our hours, and pay us. Instead, we are typically booked through language service providers (LSPs). The state claims it can't be responsible for LSPs' behavior when they pay us late, short us money on paychecks, or blacklist us for calling out sick. After a plethora of bad experiences I asked a BOLI staff member what recourse I had. I was told I could file suit but it would be a waste of my time because there is no legal recourse even if I am paid late or underpaid on every single check so long as I eventually get the money in mediation.

The status quo also results in limited access to competent interpreters for patients who need interpreting services to communicate. In Oregon, interpreters are available to CCO members who need them [less than 6%](#) of the time. Unfortunately the companies that pay the lowest and are least likely to be able to attract interpreters on the OHA registry are the same companies able to bid the lowest in attempts to secure contracts with the state and with CCOs.

I was hopeful in 2019 when we secured the right to collective bargaining with the state through bipartisan legislation. We formed our union, elected a bargaining team, and began negotiations with the state in 2021. Like many interpreters, my hope turned to disappointment as the state repeatedly refused to negotiate rates with us—first because of the lack of funds to pay us with, then (once funds were provided) because of the lack of a scheduling system. This legislature already passed a bill directing the state to study potential scheduling systems in 2021. They completed that study but claim that without direction from the legislature they can't move forward with creating or purchasing access to a scheduling/payment system. That is why I am here today.

Having a statewide scheduling/payment system gives the state a practical way to pay us directly for our work. It gives providers a platform to book interpreters who they know meet minimum state standards, rather than hoping that the LSP will send someone on the registry. It enables us to move forward with bargaining our first contract and take jobs protected by the provisions of our union contract once it is negotiated, so that we have a choice whether to take jobs through LSPs or not and can say “yes” to companies that treat us well and “no” to exploitative companies, rather than having to say “yes” to every job we're offered or take non-interpreting work to fill in the gaps. And it allows us to use a familiar system to accept jobs—the LSPs we currently take jobs from use similar scheduling systems, such as BoostLingo, GridCheck, or AquaSchedule. If we're worried about

interpreters on their phones, as one LSP suggests, I receive hundreds of automated text messages from LSPs about appointments outside my region. Being able to bargain with the state about what features we want to see in a scheduling system would be hugely beneficial, whether geographic limits or making sure only interpreters with certain skills see certain jobs—this is something we have no say in currently. I personally view a “piranha pit” where the job goes to the person who selects it first as more equitable—the folks whose schedules aren’t full have time to look at their phones, those who are busy working do not. It beats a system where LSP schedulers offer jobs to the interpreters they know the best and interpreters bring gift baskets to the office in attempts to get more work.

Finally, you will hear from many language companies that they are unable to find interpreters on the OHA registry willing to do remote work, or that there are not enough interpreters for all jobs to be covered through this system. Appointments not covered through this scheduling system or the nonprofit support staff could still be sent out to LSPs if not covered through the state scheduling system. Nonetheless, I want to offer some hope. Many of us, especially those of us in rural areas who cannot fill our schedules with in-person work, want to work remotely. However, too many of us have tried on-demand remote work only to sit for 8 hours unpaid waiting for calls for every hour of paid time on an on-demand call. I believe that being able to negotiate pay for idle time has the potential to get many more credentialed interpreters to accept on-demand remote work. Additionally, with better working conditions and support for training and continuing education, I believe that it would be possible to grow the workforce and increase the number of languages represented on the OHA registry.

SB 1578 will be a meaningful step in improving working conditions for hundreds of health care interpreters like myself. It gives us a way to accept jobs from the state directly, enabling us to choose not to work for LSPs or to work only for the LSPs that we want to, rather than having to work for LSPs that treat us poorly or take up other jobs outside of our field to make ends meet. It will give the state access to a scheduling and payment system that reduces State spending on third-party scheduling companies while allowing interpreters to earn living wages. It will ensure that jobs are available to interpreters on the OHA registry first when posted on the scheduling system, making it easier for providers to secure a credentialed interpreter. Finally, it will make it possible for skilled interpreters to stay in the profession longer, improving health outcomes for patients and providers who rely on interpreting services to communicate with one another.

I urge you to please vote yes on SB 1578 and support the hundreds of health care interpreters like myself so that we can continue to serve our communities.