



February 26, 2025

RE: Senate Bill 476

Dear Chair Patterson, Vice-Chair Hayden, and members of committee:

Since 1976, the Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization (IRCO) has supported our immigrant and refugee communities in achieving self-sufficiency and overcome the barriers to build meaningful lives in Oregon and across our region. Today, through IRCO's mission to welcome, serve, and empower refugees, immigrants, and people across cultures and generations to reach their full potential—we recognize the positive impact of Senate Bill 476 if passed for our communities, Oregon's workforce, and Oregonians all together.

In 2023, IRCO published our first Workforce Community Need Assessment funded by HECC Future Ready, Round 1. The report was built from focus groups of immigrant and refugee communities (e.g., Vietnamese, Ethiopian, Ukrainian, Latinx) to understand people's career background/interests, the barriers they face, and resources needed when trying to enter Oregon priority industries like manufacturing, healthcare, and information technology. Participants were interested in fields they've had prior training in or they'd been exposed to since arriving in the U.S. All participants worked in a variety of lower wage "survival jobs" (low-skilled jobs they obtain/stay in when participants first arrived in Oregon) particularly in industries like caregiving, education, custodial and hospitality, and food service. Participants cited the four most common employment barriers as 1) lack of information, connection, and exposure, 2) language barrier, 3) family/financial responsibilities and cost of training, 4) native degrees or qualifications not accepted. "I know two doctors who are now working as interpreters," said one Iraqi participant. These jobseekers have incredible potential yet face multiple barriers to careers requiring professional licensing or certification.

With the declining birth rate and the baby boomer generation retiring, Oregon is facing tremendous challenges in filling the demands of our workforce to meet the needs of today and the growing needs of tomorrow. According to Oregon's "Oregon 2024 Talent Assessment," skilled workforce deficit is critical with only 66 people for every 100 jobs posted statewide. We are in urgent need of professionals with backgrounds in critical services and industries—including healthcare.

Senate Bill 476 offers a step forward in building a pathway for Oregonians limited by their place of training, education, background, and experience to find ways into their professional fields again and give back meaningfully to their new home. By doing so we are ensuring that Oregon's workforce takes advantage of every Oregonian willing and able to use their expertise and knowledge to do the work, better themselves, better our communities, and reach their full potential.

Respectfully,

Sokho Eath

The Immigrant and Refugee Community Organization