

Submitter: Kimberly Puttman
On Behalf Of:
Committee: House Committee On Early Childhood and Human Services
Measure, Appointment or Topic: HB2976

Chair Hartman, Vice-Chair Nguyen, Vice-Chair Scharf, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Rev. Kimberly Puttman and I am an educator with Conexión Fénix, a non-profit organization that supports the Latino community in Lincoln County, Oregon. We strongly support HB 2976.

In a recent community workshop, our community members discussed the importance of maintaining their cultural heritage while they work, care for their families, and contribute to our Lincoln County community. Their connection to their home languages of Spanish, Mam, Mixteco, Nahuatl, and other Indigenous languages connected them to their ancestors and their families, whether here or far away. But speaking a familiar language goes far beyond resilience and pride, although those strengths are important. Communication and interpretation in these languages are vital for individual and family survival and economic success.

In order to receive quality health care, navigate complex legal systems, enjoy the benefits of education systems, or even fill out basic paperwork, people who speak indigenous languages require qualified interpreters. According to the Oregon Health Authority, we have a significant shortage of interpreters in rural areas, and even fewer indigenous language interpreters.

Additionally, the path to becoming a qualified interpreter for speakers of indigenous languages is laborious at best. While formal language proficiency tests exist for Spanish, they don't exist for many indigenous languages. Therefore, indigenous interpreters can't be credentialed in the languages they speak. This hinders the ability of interpreters to be formally employed in health care and legal settings.

Conexión Fénix is creating career pathways for community and medical interpreting in Lincoln County. The lack of credentialing in Indigenous languages is a roadblock in creating the workforce development that our county desperately needs.

More importantly, the lack of credentialed Indigenous interpreters limits full access to medical care, education, legal processes, and other critical areas of participation that English speakers take for granted. For example, unqualified interpreters may miss important elements of translating medical information, creating poor health outcomes for Indigenous families.

HB 2976 would allocate funding to develop language proficiency evaluations, recruit and retain a qualified workforce, and coordinate appointments across many different entities, helping remove significant barriers for individuals needing interpretation services in some of life's most critical moments.

We of Conexión Fénix urge your support for HB 2976 so that everyone can access the power of language to live vibrant and thriving lives across our beautiful state of Oregon.

Sincerely,

Rev. Kimberly Puttman
On behalf of Conexión Fénix