

SENATE BILL REPORT

SB 6832

As Passed Senate, March 12, 2002

Title: An act relating to interpreter services for public assistance recipients.

Brief Description: Establishing department of social and health services authority to purchase interpreter services for public assistance recipients.

Sponsors: Senators Brown, Winsley, Thibaudeau, Deccio and Franklin.

Brief History:

Committee Activity: Ways & Means: 3/5/02, 3/6/02 [DP].

Passed Senate: 3/12/02, 48-0.

SENATE COMMITTEE ON WAYS & MEANS

Majority Report: Do pass.

Signed by Senators Brown, Chair; Regala, Vice Chair; Fairley, Vice Chair; Fraser, Kline, Kohl-Welles, Long, Rasmussen, B. Sheldon, Snyder, Spanel and Thibaudeau.

Staff: Tim Yowell (786-7435)

Background: The Department of Social and Health Services (DSHS) will provide income and medical assistance and other social services to an average of at least 75,000 persons per month this year who have limited English-speaking ability. Federal civil rights rules require the department to arrange or provide interpreter services to the extent necessary to assure equal access to services for persons with limited English-speaking ability. DSHS expects to spend about \$24 million next year on interpreter services.

Throughout most of the 1990's, DSHS purchased most interpreter services as direct client services, which are exempt from the competitive procurement provisions of state purchasing statutes. DSHS contracted with any qualified interpreter who was willing to accept a standard rate established by the department. In 1995, because of concerns about inadequate monitoring, coordination, and control, DSHS sought to institute a "brokerage" model for interpreter services, similar to the one it has used for a number of years for transportation services. The broker receives a fee to schedule and coordinate the linkage of clients with their appointments across DSHS programs. Unsuccessful bidders for the brokerage contract successfully sued on the grounds that the department had not complied with all applicable state procurement statutes.

Since early 1999, DSHS has purchased most interpreter services from agencies selected through a competitive procurement process conducted jointly by DSHS and the Department of General Administration. Agency rates under these contracts average about \$36 per interpreter hour. Prior to April 1999, the DSHS Medical Assistance Administration was paying about \$23 per interpreter hour for agency services, and \$16 per interpreter hour for individual providers, under the "any qualified provider" contracting model.

Summary of Bill: Interpreter services and interpreter brokerage services are exempt from the statutes governing procurement of non-client services. DSHS is directed to procure and deliver these services through whatever means it determines to be most cost-effective.

Appropriation: None.

Fiscal Note: Not requested.

Effective Date: Ninety days after adjournment of session in which bill is passed.

Testimony For: It is very important to physicians that the state continue to provide interpreter services for Medicaid patients with limited English-speaking ability.

Testimony Against: The state may not actually be able to obtain sufficient qualified interpreters if it spends 20 percent less on those services, as anticipated in the proposed Senate budget.

Testified: Susie Tracy, Washington State Medical Association.