

Linguistic Access to Health Care in Wisconsin: A Resource and Needs Assessment

Wisconsin's changing demographics have created a rapidly growing need for language interpreters who can enable limited English proficient (LEP) patients to access health care services. Federal laws mandate that health care organizations provide linguistic access for those with limited English skills. Although organizations strive to provide quality language services to diverse population groups, most find that this is a challenging goal. The Wisconsin Coalition for Linguistic Access to Healthcare (WCLAH) was created in 2003 to help improve the quality of health services for LEP populations. The coalition's members represent many diverse organizations and share the vision of a future *statewide system that leads to positive health care outcomes for populations with limited English proficiency*.

The coalition recently released findings from a statewide study that examined how health care organizations provide interpreter services to their non-English speaking clients. Over 200 hospitals, local public health departments, and federally qualified health centers were surveyed and 133 (62%) responded. Results suggest that a number of barriers exist, limiting the ability of Wisconsin's health care organizations to consistently provide quality care to their patients with limited English skills. These barriers include the following:

- Organizations do not have easy access to resources and information on the provision of care to LEP patients.
- Over half of the organizations currently have only occasional need for interpreter services (fewer than 5 times per week).
- Periodic and/or standardized training opportunities for interpreters are not readily available.
- Most organizations do not have a process in place to assess the skills of their interpreters.
- Providers and staff are generally unaware of best practices in providing care to LEP patients.
- There are high costs associated with providing interpreter services and limited reimbursement is available.

The Wisconsin Coalition for Linguistic Access to Healthcare is developing several projects to further the vision of a statewide system leading to positive health outcomes for populations with limited English proficiency. Planned for development during the next year are:

- Creation of a web site to serve as the Wisconsin health care interpreting information and resource center. It will contain information on interpreter standards, roles, and training opportunities; related laws, advocacy, and best practices; training opportunities for health care providers and advocates; model community collaborations that improve access; sample policies and procedures; and resources for high quality translated materials.
- Delivery of a regular series of continuing education offerings for interpreters.
- Development, testing and distribution of training materials for health care providers on working effectively with medical interpreters.
- Development of an interpreter skills proficiency assessment process.
- Support for development of local or regional interpreter services consortia.

A copy of the full report is available at www.ahcc.wisc.edu