

Eliminating Health Disparities Due to Language Barriers

Cross Cultural Initiatives

Office of Community Programs

Improving patient communications – by speaking their language

A patient with limited understanding of the English language is often unable to communicate their health care needs. Communication is the most important tool utilized by health care providers to understand, diagnose and treat a patient. In the United States, it is essential to meet the medical needs of immigrant communities. One way is to provide a medically trained interpreter for the interaction. The medical interpreter will not only provide essential communication, but will bridge most cultural issues that may arise. In addition to language interpretation, printed materials in various languages that accommodate the literacy levels of the majority of the immigrant communities, while addressing issues of cultural sensitivity, are an important component to providing health care to non-English speaking people.



The Massachusetts Executive Office of Health and Human Services (EOHHS) recognized the need to have professionally trained medical interpreters available for Massachusetts Medicaid (MassHealth) patients who have limited English language skills. While providers expressed the desire to be able to effectively communicate with patients and provide quality care, and were strongly encouraged to meet the needs of limited English speaking patients, they experienced difficulty finding qualified interpreters and so appealed to MassHealth for help. In partnership with the Office of Community Programs (OCP) and in collaboration with the Massachusetts Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Network, EOHHS established and continues to sponsor the Medical Interpreter Training (MIT) Program. MIT is an effective mechanism to outreach, identify, recruit, and train bilingual individuals working in MassHealth settings regarding the roles and introductory skills of medical interpretation.

Understanding a patient's needs is more than just knowing the language

The Medical Interpreter Training (MIT) Program trains more than 300 individuals annually in Massachusetts. OCP is committed to the idea that providing exceptional training helps

ensure limited English proficiency patients of diverse cultures and languages have equal access to quality health care through the utilization of trained and competent interpreters. The MIT Program covers 54 hours of training, both in language proficiency and medical terminology. This rigorous and intensive program provides the interpreter with critical skills and techniques, and impresses upon them the need for accuracy and responsiveness. It also shows them how they play a vital role in the patient-doctor interaction.

In many situations, it is not just a language barrier that needs to be breached. Different cultures have different expectations and requirements when it comes to health care. The MIT Program trains interpreters to heighten their awareness of cross cultural issues or concerns that may impede quality care. For example, in some cultures it is considered unthinkable to have a man treating and even interpreting for a female patient. An MIT trained interpreter would be able to determine this quickly in a brief conversation, and make a recommendation to have either a female doctor treat the patient, or a female interpreter interpret, or both if necessary.

In addition, OCP has provided customized medical interpreter training as well as cross cultural competency training to other states, including Connecticut, Rhode Island, South Carolina and Maine. It has also produced cross cultural training DVDs, provided advanced training at various medical centers and educational facilities, and co-sponsored the Massachusetts Medical Interpreter's Conference.

It is important that public health and other agencies provide critical patient education materials in languages other than English. Accurate, culturally sensitive document translation at appropriate reading levels is an essential tool in communicating effectively with Massachusetts residents who have limited English proficiency. OCP provides high quality translation services to agencies for various patient education tools.

Results

Since 1999, nearly 300 people each year have received medical interpreter and cultural awareness training through the MIT Program at OCP – totaling almost 2,100 interpreters in Massachusetts. This significantly improved patient

Training is available in the following languages:

- Albanian
- Arabic
- Cape Verdean
- Creole
- French
- German
- Haitian Creole
- Hmong
- Krahn
- Portuguese
- Quechua
- Somali
- Spanish
- Twi
- Vietnamese

communication and the health care experience for many with a limited understanding of English.

Additionally, nearly 600 medical interpreters continue to learn and build skills annually through the Massachusetts Medical Interpreter's Conference, co-sponsored by the MIT Program.

Looking Toward the Future

These programs, designed to help health care providers understand the need to recognize, embrace and honor the values and norms of others, will continue to grow and change as required by the ever changing needs of patients and clinicians. MIT will continue to work with partners such as EOHHS and respond to the needs of the community. For example, work is underway to foster development of specialized training for advanced interpreters, and in conjunction with Massachusetts AHEC, update and improve the current curriculum due to the changing marketplace. MIT will continue to strive to ensure that non-English speaking individuals understand what is taking place in the patient-doctor interaction, and are fully involved in making decisions regarding their own health care through the use of well prepared interpreters.

About the Office of Community Programs (OCP)

As part of the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Commonwealth Medicine division, the Office of Community Programs (OCP) serves as a vital bridge between the knowledge and resources of the Medical School and health care programs in local communities. Our dedicated staff works closely with state Medicaid programs, government agencies and community-based organizations to identify areas where there may be barriers to care. Based on Best Practices and the latest health policy information, we then develop strategic, practical solutions for the development and implementation of community-based health care programs and services. As a result, OCP implements innovative health care services and educational programs to more communities. These services and programs include:

- Community Health Center Initiatives
- Dental Services, Training and Capacity Building

- New England AIDS Education and Training Center
- MassHealth Training Forum
- Cross Cultural Initiatives
- Community Service and Service Learning

Message from Mick Huppert, M.P.H., Director and Associate Dean, Office of Community Programs

In our diverse world, ensuring that people with limited English competency or specific cultural requirements have access to quality health care is an obligation for all health care providers. However, there is a scarcity of well-trained, accomplished medical interpreters. I am pleased the Office of Community Programs is working to address this critical need in Massachusetts and other states, and partnering with others who also understand that being aware of and respecting diversity of language and culture is a necessary part of providing quality health care today.

Message from Lisa Morris, M.S.T.D., Director, Cross Cultural Initiatives, Office of Community Programs

I would like to acknowledge a number of organizations who have supported the development and growth through the years of the Medical Interpreter Training Program and other Cross Cultural Initiatives.

- UMass Medical School and Commonwealth Medicine
- Office of Medicaid
- Massachusetts Statewide Area Health Education Centers Network
- Department of Family Medicine and Community Health, UMass Medical School
- Massachusetts Medical Interpreters Association
- National Council on Interpreting in Health Care
- Harvard Pilgrim Health Care Foundation
- Blue Cross Blue Shield Foundation of Massachusetts
- Massachusetts Department of Mental Health
- Massachusetts Department of Public Health
- Language Link
- Vision in Action
- Medical Interpreter Alumnae

Contact us for more information

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