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Language Access Toolkit
for Health Care Professionals

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Know Your Patients' Language Access Rights

Patient Requests for Translations

What the law requires

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 requires recipients of Federal financial assistance to take reasonable steps to make their programs, services, and activities accessible by eligible persons with limited English proficiency.

Patients' rights to language access

Health care professionals should ensure that families know and understand their rights to language services in the healthcare setting.

Language access is part of health equity.

Where to offer translation services

Print and Digital Media

- Print media (signs, sign-in sheets)
- Communication through text, phone call or email
- Information available in the lobby or waiting room (TV)
- Online portal

Patient Forms

- Medical records
- HIPAA forms
- Consent forms
- Release forms
- Agreement forms
- Explanations of services and costs

Benefits and Billing

- Summary of Benefits
- Insurance information from MCOs (Managed Care Organizations)
- Billing statements

Patient Communications

- Visit summaries
- Follow-up instructions
- Post-visit surveys
- Office calls and voicemail automated system
- Email and texts
- Medication instructions

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Offering Interpretation Services

Interpretation services help families communicate their needs, questions, and concerns clearly with medical professionals and understand important health information.

Patients can request interpretation:

- **In person**, where the interpreter is with the patient at an appointment
- **By phone**, where the interpreter is on the phone during a patient appointment
- **Virtually**, where the interpreter is on video during an appointment

Providing Interpretation Accommodations

It is important to help families feel comfortable requesting interpretation services. Families might be concerned about stigma, or they might not know they can ask for language support.

Talking to Patients

- Encourage patients to communicate their interpretation needs before an appointment. This can happen when they schedule the appointment or on the appointment confirmation call.
- Don't assume a patient needs interpretation services. Instead, ask every patient if they prefer to communicate and receive medical information in a language other than English.
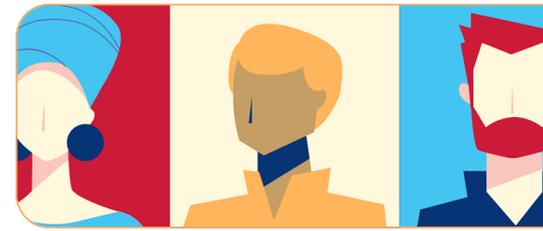- Keep language preference information in the patient's medical chart.

Working within Systems

In hospitals, emergency rooms, urgent care clinics and other public settings, ask patients whether they want interpretation services during registration and check-in.

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Documenting Patients' Language Access Needs

Meeting your patients' language access needs starts before the patient encounter.

A patient's pre-visit documents, including privacy forms and other patient information collected before a medical visit, can help you gather information that supports the patient's ability to access language services and participate in their care.

You can work with your team or system to identify ways to save this information in your patients' medical records.

Collecting Patient Information

Preferred Language

- What is the patient's preferred spoken language?
- What is the patient's preferred written language?
- Does the patient use sign language?

Assistance

- Does the patient want help completing forms?
- Does the patient want interpretation/translation services?

Access

- Does the patient have access to reliable internet?
- Does the patient have a smartphone or other technology?

Accommodations

- Does the patient prefer a private waiting room space?
- Are there other accommodations the patient or their care partner needs related to disability, medical status or something else?

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Know Your Patients' Language Access Rights

Working with Medical Interpreters

Patients whose preferred language is not English have a right to receive free language access services in the health care setting. This includes translations of written materials and interpretation of language that is spoken or signed.

When it comes to working with a medical interpreter, quality matters. The quality of an interpreter affects the accuracy of the interpretation, the patient's ability to participate in their care, and the overall patient experience.

Finding and Using Interpreter Services or Software

What to look for

- Certified medical interpreters with experience in the health care setting
- High quality interpretation applications and software
- Interpreter services or software that use plain language
- Community partners or liaisons who are qualified to provide medical interpretation services

What to avoid

- Having children, family members, staff members, or other patients serve as interpreters
- Rushing the patient or interpreter so the patient does not have time to ask questions or confirm their understanding
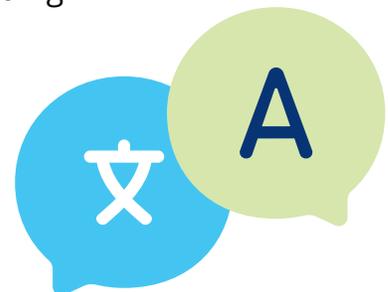
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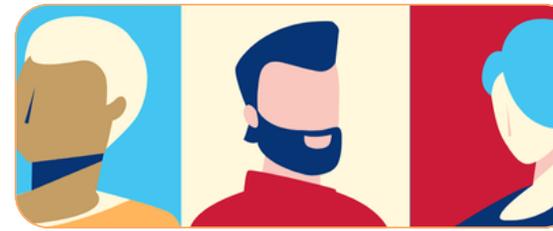
Language Access and the Patient Experience

Effective language access services can promote a smooth patient experience.

Normalize the Use of Language Services.

Oftentimes, the stigma of requesting language access services or accommodations is a significant barrier for patients. They may feel embarrassed or fear that they will face discrimination if they ask to receive care in their preferred language.

Prioritize Access and Comfort.

- Provide interpretation services in a variety of modalities (in person, virtual/video, phone).
- Create a private space for families to feel comfortable requesting language access services, accommodations, or any other needs.

Reducing Stigma

- Have visible signage with information about language access resources and services for patients **in common areas**.

- Have signage with information about language access resources and services for patients **in multiple languages**.

- Maintain patient **privacy** and an inviting environment for patients to feel comfortable in requesting language access information.

- Offer any **website** in languages other than English.

- Include a webpage on **language access resources and services** available at your practice or location.

Working with Your Team

- Identify an internal **communication tool** (like Slack, Microsoft Teams, email, etc.) for sharing information about language access resources among all staff.

- Provide **training** on language access resources to all staff.

- Develop a **policy** on language access resource training requirements and expectations of all staff.

- Provide adequate appointment **time** when an interpreter is involved.

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Language Access and Culture
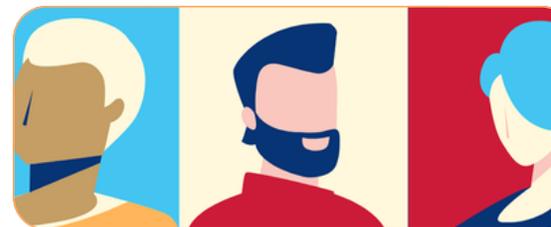
Overcoming Barriers to Improve Access and Accessibility

Communication barriers in the health care setting can be complicated. From the physical environment to the emotional state of your patients, many factors can affect a health care encounter. These can be more complex for patients whose preferred language is not English.

Common Communication Barriers and How to Address Them

Adapted from F Learning Studio

1 Physical and Environmental Distractions

Noise: Noise levels can affect the quality of interpretation services or telehealth services and create distractions for the patient and the interpreter.

Internet Signal: A poor phone or internet signal for the interpreter or the telehealth patient can interrupt a medical visit.

Time and Distance: In-person language access services need to take into consideration the place, time, and distance to be traveled by the patient and the interpreter so everyone can be present and ready to participate.

2 Cultural Differences

Culture impacts patients' health care decision-making. Cultural can influence how people interpret symbols, colors, ideas and words.

For example:

- Certain health topics are taboo to discuss in some cultures.
- People from some cultural groups are very trusting of health care professionals, while others may have less trust.

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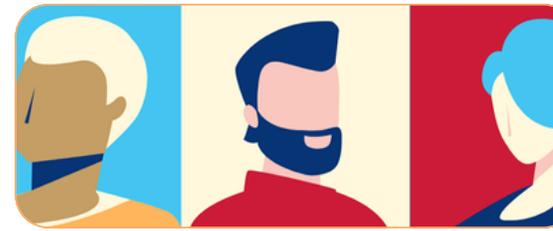
Common Communication Barriers and How to Address Them

3 Language Barriers

Misinterpretation: Medical language and health care facts can be easily misinterpreted. Patients can end up believing false or oversimplified information like *cholesterol is bad, eating before bed causes obesity, or cold weather causes a cold*. Sharing accurate medical information in simple ways can help patients understand and support their health goals.

Medical Jargon: Since most patients don't have a medical background, using medical or health care jargon can create communication barriers. Even when patients are knowledgeable about their care, jargon can be confusing. Plain language can help patients understand their conditions, treatments, and medications, and feel less intimidated about communicating their concerns. Using accurate language in a consistent way can help build the patient's knowledge of important health information.

Different Languages: For patients whose preferred language is not English, it is important to use simple language, which is easier to translate and interpret. This helps to ensure that accurate information is being shared with the patient.

4 Personal Perspectives

Differences in people's emotions, experiences and ways of thinking may create barriers between patients and other health care professionals. Everyone comes to a health care encounter with their own unique sets of judgments, feelings, skills, and social values.
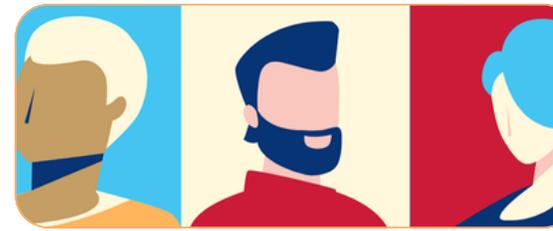
Health care professionals and patients may have different perspectives about health care, for example:

- A focus on long-term treatment vs. day-to-day life
- A focus on the causes of a condition vs. how the symptoms affect quality of life

Understanding the patient's personal perspectives can help health care professionals work together with patients to develop care effective plans.

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Language Access and Culture

Creating an Environment for Good Communication with Patients

Health care professionals invest energy, time, and effort into communicating with patients. Effective communication builds trust and enhances patient health, while ineffective communication may have a negative affect on the patient's well-being.

Communication between the health care team and patients, from the reception desk to the exam room, has a big impact on care, from increasing efficiency to cutting costs.

Building trust through accessible and equitable communication

Accessible communication, including sign language and engaging patients who use adaptive and augmentative communication (AAC) tools, creates opportunities for patients with disabilities to have responsive and equitable health care experiences.

Language access services allow patients whose preferred language is not English to have access their medical history and communicate with their health care providers. Effective communication builds trust between health professionals and patients, too. Trust can make it easier for patients to accept recommendations from their doctors and follow their treatment plans if they are delivered and explained in their preferred language.

What happens when you are using language access services and the patient still has trouble understanding?

- Be patient – give the patient or interpreter more time.
- Make sure you have your patient's and the interpreter's attention before talking.
- Reduce noise and distractions.
- Use short sentences and familiar words.

- Emphasize the keyword or phrase.
- Speak clearly and slowly and use a respectful tone of voice.
- Check that the patient is using hearing aids and glasses if needed.

Adapted from Curogram.com

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Working with Families of Children with Special Health Care Needs

A Guide for Medical Interpreters

We heard from families and health care providers about their appreciation for interpreters and their suggestions for improving the interpretation experience.

Families and providers are more comfortable with in-person interpretation than other communication methods such as online, video, or phone. They have found that in-person interpretation is more effective, accurate, and reliable. When possible, offer in-person interpretation so families can benefit from understanding body language, facial expression and language all at once.

Families are worried that their medical information will not be kept private when the interpreter is someone they know from their community. Help families understand that you, as a medical interpreter, have to keep their information private. Talk to them briefly about how professional medical interpreters commit to privacy, invite them to ask questions, and discuss their concerns.

Families are worried that the interpretation will not fully express what they are trying to communicate to the provider. Sometimes they doubt the accuracy of the interpretation, especially if they have said a lot and very few words are shared with the health care provider. Before you begin interpreting, help the family understand that the process of interpretation may involve keeping ideas simple. Tell the family what you share with the provider and check to make sure the interpretation has captured what they want the provider to know.

Families are concerned that the medical interpreter might not understand their culture and dialect. Explaining your experience with their culture or dialect, or telling what you might not understand, can help families feel more at ease.

Interpreters should continue to promote language access and raise awareness to help the community understand the importance of having an interpreter by their side in the health care setting. You can share information in your community and encourage families to use these services, especially since language access services never cost the family money.

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