

Language Assistance

Background

In today's complex medical world, it is crucial that patients understand the instructions given by their doctors, and perhaps more importantly, that doctors understand their patients -- which can be nearly impossible when a language barrier prevents them from communicating with each other. As of January 1, 2009, a new state law, put into effect by the DMHC made California the first state in the nation to require that medical services, materials, and information are provided to commercial health plan members in their spoken languages, and requires interpretation for those of no or limited English proficiency (LEP) at each point of service, such as the doctor's office, a laboratory, or a therapy facility. This landmark law has made a profound, positive change in the way millions of LEP Californians communicate with their doctors.

Summary

- Most health plans, and all large health plans, must provide written material in the top language(s) spoken by their members. All health plans must provide an interpreter when requested. Interpreters may be provided either in-person, or through a telephone or video-conferencing system.
- Examples of the types of materials health plans may be required to translate are:
 - Standard letters and notices of health plan eligibility and membership requirements
 - Notices of any denial, reduction, modification, or termination of services and benefits
 - Notices of the right to file grievances or appeals
- The patient is not charged for these services. Payment is the responsibility of the health plan.
- Plans are required to re-assess their enrollee populations every three years, and adjust if the demographic has changed.
- If a consumer has a problem getting an interpreter or translated materials, they should call the DMHC Help Center at 1-888-466-2219, or file a complaint at www.healthhelp.ca.gov.

Related Content

Language Assistance home page: http://healthhelp.ca.gov/healthplans/gen/gen_langassist.aspx

Language Assistance FAQs: http://healthhelp.ca.gov/healthplans/gen/gen_lafaq.aspx

Sample Notice of Language Assistance: <http://healthhelp.ca.gov/library/reports/news/snla.pdf>

Plan Threshold Languages: <http://healthhelp.ca.gov/library/reports/news/thresholdlanguages.pdf>

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