



## *Area Health Education Centers*

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### **Public Health Committee House Bill 5608**

#### ***Enhancements of the National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) in Healthcare***

Please allow me to introduce myself and the Eastern Area Health Education Center (AHEC) Inc. As the Executive Director for the past ten years, we have had significant involvement working toward the elimination of health disparities through a variety of programs and services incorporating CLAS Standards. The standards were developed in 2000 by the HHS Office of Minority Health and are under revision at this time. The CMHP responded to the public announcement calling for recommendations. The revised standards will be published for review in spring of 2011 with the final version being published in fall of 2011. The Joint Commission will be enforcing their equivalent Language Access Service Standards in all facilities they license as of January 2012.

The language standards 4-7 (as they read now) speak to limited English proficient patients. Collectively, however, the CLAS Standards define language access services as addressing literacy, health literacy, and limited English proficiency and communication disabilities. The Standards also traditionally address racial and ethnic health disparities, and the direction we need to take is to include other medically underserved populations such as people in gay, lesbian and transgendered communities.

Implementation of the Standards will require significant funding to allow for extensive training and support in the development, implementation and evaluation of the CLAS Standards for physicians and other healthcare providers, support staff and administrators. This will include credentialing Medical Interpreters to include language proficiency assessment, medical interpreter training and qualifying for national certification of bi-lingual staff.

Eastern AHEC Inc. directs the *Connecticut AHEC Medical Interpreter Training Program*. Services include language proficiency assessments, a basic medical interpreter training course and specialty training seminars for sign and spoken language interpreters (in collaboration with FSW). The medical interpreter training program assessed almost 300 bi-lingual healthcare employees in 14 different languages, trained more than 100 bi-lingual employees as spoken language medical interpreters' and more than 150 sign and spoken language interpreters in specialty areas. Eastern AHEC Inc. is an Authorized Provider of the *International Association of Continuing Education and Training*. The director of the program also serves as the State Representative for the International

Medical Interpreter Association and participates with the *National Board for Medical Interpreter Certification* ([www.certifiedmedicalinterpreters.org](http://www.certifiedmedicalinterpreters.org)).

Experience informs us that most hospitals and community health centers do not apply the Standards, continue to use unqualified staff and family to interpret. Educational materials and forms are found in Spanish but not necessarily in other languages commonly served by the health care facilities; patients are sent away and told to come back with their own sign or spoken language interpreter; and there is tremendous resistance to serving populations who need language assistance because of costs incurred by the healthcare provider.

Experience also informs us that hospitals and community health centers that have started assessing and training their bi-lingual employees (e.g. Bridgeport Hospital and Hartford Hospital) report increased satisfaction by patients and physicians. Furthermore, research supports increased patient satisfaction with qualified, face-to-face medical interpreters and hence increased compliance, saving money in the long run.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Project Management for the CT Multicultural Health Partnership*

In 2006 Nancy Berger, formally the Director of the Office of Multicultural Health with DPH and myself, spear-headed the effort to establish the Connecticut Multicultural Health Partnership with the primary focus promoting the *spirit and intent of the CLAS Standard everywhere they should be*. A State Plan was developed and organized around the standards and approved by the federal Office of Minority Health in 2008.

Eastern AHEC received a grant from the Office of Minority Health, Regional Health Administrator Region 1, to contribute to the overall mission of the Partnership by enhancing the cross-cultural skills of public health and health care professionals through training recommendations, dissemination of training materials and providing educational forums. Southwestern AHEC received a grant from the OMH, Region 1 to assess language services provided by community health centers and local health departments.

Both CMHP assessments quickly discovered that very few agencies have standardized policy or service protocols that address cultural and linguistic competencies. If policies existed, multiple departments or units were assigned responsibilities creating a fragmented system that was not consistently implemented across departments or units. Relying on family and friends to interpret, utilizing bi-lingual staff to translate with no

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<sup>1</sup> Bagchi et al., Ann D. 2010. Using Professionally Trained Interpreters to Increase Patient/Provider Satisfaction. Mathematica Policy Research Inc., [http://www.mathematicmpr.com/publications/pdfs/health/trained\\_interpreters\\_IB.pdf](http://www.mathematicmpr.com/publications/pdfs/health/trained_interpreters_IB.pdf) Accessed 1 December 2010.

knowledge of staff language abilities, and not addressing health literacy was seen across the board in state and nonprofit health and social service agencies and organizations.

In order to assess professional development training needs, Eastern AHEC utilized one of the Culturally & Linguistically Appropriate Service (CLAS) Standards organizational assessment instruments and conducted four regional focus groups. Agency representatives were asked to share what they do both formally and informally to meet the cultural and linguistic needs of the communities they serve.

As a result, professional development training recommendations were made and organized around the 14 CLAS Standards. The full report: [Training Recommendations for Health Care Providers in Connecticut](#) can be found on the CMHP website under resources: [www.ctmhp.org](http://www.ctmhp.org).

The Language Service Committee of CMHP is submitting testimony on the results and recommendations of their survey: [Language Needs and Services of Local Health Districts and Community Health Centers](#) (Annual Report 2009 at [www.ctmhp.org](http://www.ctmhp.org)).

To date, more than 1,800 healthcare providers have received a professional development session regarding health disparities and/or the CLAS Standards. As the project manager for the CT Multicultural Health Partnership, the CT State Medical Society, Hispanic Health Center and the University of CT Health Center, School of Medicine, were brought together by to develop, implement and evaluate professional training and community outreach programs. Financial contributors toward these programs included the Connecticut Health Foundation, CT AHEC Program, Universal Health Care Foundation, the Office of Minority Health Region 1 and Performance Edge.

The training venues include the following:

- *Faces of Disparity*: This is a complete training package that includes a 20 minute video and display panels developed and implemented by the Communications Committee and the Professional Development Committee, chaired by Catherine Wagner, created the accompanying [Self-Study Manual & Facilitator Manual](#).
- *Care in Context: The Physician's Role in Eliminating Health Disparities*: This program is directed by Christi Holmes of the Connecticut State Medical Society, a partner of CMHP. Dr. Natalie Achong is the primary presenter and Catherine Wagner created the learning materials.
- *Unnatural Causes: Is the Environment Making us Sick?* This program is a collaborative effort in part funded by CMHP. Karen D'Angelo of the Hispanic

Health Center and Stacy Brown of the UCHC, School of Medicine, are the primary developers and facilitators.

### *Performance Data Measurement System*

A comprehensive evaluation system was developed under the leadership and funding of the federal Office of Minority Health. A consultant provided by OMH, in collaboration with our local evaluation consultant, Tamera Petro, Multicultural Leadership Institute, created a system that includes standardized program evaluation and other tracking forms to be entered into the PDMS System, complimented by quarterly narrative reports.

For example, the PDMS is designed to demonstrate federally program's impact on health disparities, with the support of the State Department of Public Health. One outcome the CMHP is tracking is the increase number of organizations that offer Language Access Services that reflect the populations they serve (this is a required outcome measure for all grantees). One of the CMHP optional performance measures to increase the number of partnering organizations that have strategic plans and/or formal strategic planning processes to guide and monitor their progress addressing health disparities (CLAS Standard #8).

Implementation of the CLAS Standards, particularly the Language Access Services, is challenging for most physicians and healthcare organizations to say the least. To not adequately provide the resources may have serious unintended consequences that can further reinforce barriers to care. Creating legislation that helps to prepare healthcare providers and their organizations or practices with the training, technical support and financial resources needed to provide culturally and linguistically competent services will be required.

Eastern AHEC Inc. recommends the following

- Support Credentialing of medical interpreters
- Provide incentives to healthcare organizations to come into compliance
- Determine appropriate expectations and guidance for private practices
- Work with the Office of Civil Rights who has enforcement power and acts upon complaints

Please feel free to contact me if Eastern AHEC Inc. and it partners may be of any assistance to you.

Respectfully submitted,

*Catherine Wagner-Russell*

Catherine Wagner-Russell, EdD  
Executive Director



