

Assuring Quality of Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Services

Hi. We're **Sherry Campanelli**, Program Compliance Manager and **Laura Newhall**, Clinical Training Coordinator, from the University of Massachusetts Medical School's **Disability Evaluation Services** (DES). DES serves many individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP) who are applying for public benefits due to a disability. As an organization, we are committed to promoting meaningful access for individuals with LEP by ensuring effective oral and written communication.

DES employs a number of bilingual staff to address the needs of people with LEP, primarily Spanish speakers, accessing DES services. The primary services provided by our bilingual staff are customer service contacts with applicants and translation of applications from Spanish to English for use in the eligibility determination process.

Federal and state regulations require organizations to ensure the competency of interpreters and the accuracy of translated materials. Don't assume fluency. It is important that bilingual staff have the language level required to perform their specific assigned work tasks. Objective assessment of competence in both languages is key to assuring the quality of LEP services.

To assess how we're meeting these requirements, we evaluated our bilingual staff's fluency. Our first step included consultation with the university's [Area Health Education Center](#) (MassAHEC) and their cultural competency program which specializes in training and testing medical interpreters (<http://massmedicalinterpreting.org/>).

MassAHEC provided the following services:

- Reviewed tasks requiring proficient bilingual communication
- Reviewed form letters written in Spanish to ensure accuracy of content compared to English
- Reviewed the level of complexity of translation including medical terminology requirements
- Developed customized oral and written competency testing of English and native/other language skills to meet our language proficiency requirements
- Tested bilingual staff for basic competency in English and their native/other language
- Provided testing results to management and certificates of basic proficiency to bilingual staff

DES is supporting continuous improvement in LEP services by:

- Assessing (English and other) language skills of prospective bilingual hires
- Encouraging staff retention by providing pay incentives for bilingual employees who earn a certificate of basic proficiency
- Encouraging enhanced skill development by providing financial support for formal medical interpreter training for bilingual staff

Hot Tip:

Consult experts in language proficiency assessment. For organizations in the health care field, the Area Health Education Center (AHEC) is a great resource. Most states have an AHEC program which is funded by the federal government to improve access to health care for underserved populations.

Lessons Learned:

“The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” - George Bernard Shaw

In order to provide quality services to individuals with LEP, you need to ensure the proficiency of bilingual staff in both English and their native/other language(s). Utilize experts in language proficiency assessment to assist you in testing bilingual staff.

Rad Resources:

[Limited English Proficiency \(LEP\): A Federal Interagency Website](#)

<https://www.hrsa.gov/index.html>, Health Resources and Services Administration which funds AHECs.