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**Language assistance now a reality for limited-English speaking  
California HMO members**

*New state law will guarantee interpretive services in doctors' offices and clinics*

(San Francisco) – A new state law, put into effect by the Department of Managed Health Care (DMHC), has 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 will make a profound, positive change in the way millions of LEP Californians communicate with their doctors.

“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,” said Cindy Ehnes, Director of the DMHC. “This landmark language assistance law will end the unnecessary distress and confusion many health plan members with LEP have when attempting to access care. It will ensure that California health plan members receive their health care services in a language that they can speak and understand.”

According to census data, 43 percent of Californians speak a language other than English at home, a proportion far higher than in any other state in the country. Of the nearly 21 million Californians belonging to HMOs, more than 16 percent of adult HMO members speak a language other than English at home.

Recent RAND studies by renowned researchers Allen Fremont and Nicole Lurie have suggested that lower quality of care/disparities in some areas of the state can be directly linked to the lower levels of linguistic proficiency among residents living there. The research demonstrates that not only is there a medical purpose for ensuring language assistance in health care, but also one of public policy.

**(more)**

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**Department of Managed Health Care**

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“Care that's not delivered in a way the patient can understand isn't care at all,” said Ellen Wu, MPH, Executive Director of the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network (CPEHN), which sponsored SB 853, the law establishing the language assistance requirement. “Our changing demographics demand that our health care system adapt. This new law - the first in the country - stands as a model for our nation as it becomes more diverse.”

Since SB 853 was passed, the DMHC implementation and public participation process to lay out the specifics of the health plans’ requirements to comply with the law have been one of the most extensive in DMHC history. More than 80 health plans under DMHC jurisdiction were required to gain approval of their language assistance programs, detailing which languages are spoken by their members, how language assistance services will be provided, what staff training is needed, and how they will ensure that services are being provided.

“I commend all the people and organizations that have worked for years to make these regulations possible. Finally, more consumers can receive medical services in their language.” says Sandra Perez, Director of the Office of the Patient Advocate. “I encourage patients and consumers to contact us if they have questions or problems.” When they make an appointment, health plan members should tell their plans, doctors, or other providers that they need language assistance. Many hospitals already provide these services for emergency services. If consumers have a problem getting an interpreter, they should call the DMHC Help Center at 1-888-466-2219, or file a complaint at [www.healthhelp.ca.gov](http://www.healthhelp.ca.gov).

The California Department of Managed Health Care is the only stand-alone HMO watchdog agency in the nation, touching the lives of more than 21 million enrollees. The DMHC has assisted more than 800,000 Californians resolve their HMO problems through its 24-hour Help Center, educates consumers on health care rights and responsibilities, and works closely with HMO plans to ensure a solvent and stable managed health care system.

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