Language Access: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Improve Patient Experience

North Shore-Long Island Jewish Medical Center | 2015

Problem
Language barriers in healthcare are associated with poor quality of care, inadequate communication of diagnosis, treatment and prescribed medication and higher rates of medical errors. The North Shore-LIJ Health System (NSLIJHS) serves a geographic area that encompasses more than 8 million people that speak over 175 languages. It is one of the largest and most diverse organizations in the country. New York is one of seven states which, taken together, account for 75% of non-English speakers in the U.S. As surrounding communities have become more diverse, the NSLIJHS has recognized the need to cultivate effective communication and diversity.

Solution
NSLIJHS leadership identified the need to promote, sustain and advance an environment that supports principles of equity, diversity, inclusion, health literacy and community. In July 2010, the NSLIJHS and Hofstra NSLIJ School of Medicine created the office of Diversity, Inclusion and Health Literacy (ODIHL). To ensure that every patient has access to language access services (LAS) to communicate, NSLIJHS aims to centralize, operationalize and deploy Language Access Services across a 19-hospital healthcare organization and over 400 ambulatory and physician practices.

NSLIJHS established corporate oversight, community relations and a system-wide LAS committee. The committee members are accountable for LAS at their respective facilities. The health system also established system-wide policies and procedures to ensure meaningful access to services, programs and activities for persons who have limited English proficiency, effective communication services for deaf or hard of hearing persons, and compliance with federal and state regulations/standards. LAS education was integrated into bi-weekly inter-professional orientation, medical resident training, employee on-boarding and annual mandatory topics. We worked to revise the Electronic Medical Record to ensure accurate documentation of LAS. Additionally, NSLIJHS partnered with Senior Nursing, Administration and Quality leadership to educate staff regarding LAS and its relationship to patient safety, quality and risk management. With these efforts, we experienced an increase in telephonic interpretation services. From 2010 to 2014 NSLIJHS had an increase of over 109,000 calls. Due to this significant increase, a proposal was developed to launch a program to train NSLIJHS bilingual staff to become qualified medical interpreters.

As the largest integrated healthcare system in NYS, the NSLIJHS understands that critical to its success is creating a culture that fosters the elimination of disparities. Addressing LAS is essential to providing person centered care and is an important factor in delivering culturally and linguistically appropriate care. Collectively, literacy, language and culture are crucial components in our global efforts to reduce healthcare disparities.

Outcomes:
1. Language Access Services initiatives were systematic and integrated into all areas of the health system with a strong commitment from executive leadership.
2. An increase in telephonic interpretation services use was observed.
3. LAS were expanded to meet the growing diverse population to include: telephonic, video and onsite interpretation services; document translation services and language testing and training.

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