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**Interpreters now available for all Californian's with health insurance  
New Law in Effect April 1**

(Madera, CA) – April 1st marks the full implementation of the *Health Care Language Access Act* by the California Department of Insurance. The first of its kind in the country, this law holds health plans and insurers accountable for the provision of language services – requiring the provision of interpreter services and translated materials to enrollees who need it. This landmark law will greatly improve the quality of care received by patients and is an important step forward in reducing the language barriers that get in the way of good medicine.

“Today marks the second and final phase of the implementation of this groundbreaking law,” explained Marty Martinez, Policy Director for the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network. HMO's, who started meeting the requirements at the beginning of 2009 will now be joined by Preferred Provider Organizations (PPO's) and other health insurance organizations. “Now all Californians with private health coverage will receive care in the language they speak and can understand.”

According to 2007 Census data, 43 percent, or slightly less than half of all residents, do not speak English at home, and in some communities, including the San Joaquin Valley, up to 40 percent of the population has limited English proficiency – meaning they speak English “less than well.” An estimated one third of the 21 million HMO and PPO members in California could benefit from the law, says the state's Managed Health Care Department.

The absence of language services restricts access to and decreases the quality of health care for non-English speaking individuals. One study found that over 25% of non-English speaking patients who needed but did not get interpreter services could not understand their medication instructions. In comparison, only 2% of individuals who received interpreter services or who did not need in them in the first place had difficulty understanding these instructions.

“Care that's not delivered in a way the patients 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 increasingly diverse.”

April 1st, marks the conclusion of almost a decade of legislative and administrative efforts to bring the language access law into full effect. Advocates and consumer groups are now turning their attention to working with communities to ensure that patients know their new rights, demand them from their providers, and know the process for filing a complaint if they are denied their rights.

“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. 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).

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