

THE SACRAMENTO BEE [sacbee.com](http://www.sacbee.com)

Capitol and California

More Information

- KEY POINTS

As of New Year's Day, non-public managed care health plans, including most medical, dental and vision insurance programs, are required to provide interpreters to communicate orally with subscribers who have difficulty understanding English.

Some key points:

- The service is the responsibility of the insurer. Insurers must provide translators regardless of language.
- Written translation is also required for key languages.
- To report problems or complaints, call the California Department of Managed Health Care at (888) 466-2219.

Related on [sacbee.com](http://www.sacbee.com)

[Sacramento Bee - - Capitol Alert](#)

6 days, 16 hours ago

[Family Watch: 'Year One' got an edit](#)

6 days, 13 hours ago



[California seeks to shorten wait time for a doctor's appointment...](#)

Bobby Caina Calvin, 1 month, 1 week ago

Capitol and California

Comments (209) | [↑ Recommend \(19\)](#) | [Print](#)

It's the law: California patients can have an interpreter at their side

ShareThis

By Bobby Caina Calvin

bcalvan@sacbee.com

Published: Saturday, Jan. 3, 2009 - 12:00 am | Page 1A

Millions of Californians with limited English proficiency now have the right to an interpreter from their commercial health and dental plans – made possible by a first-in-the-nation law aimed at dismantling the language barriers that get in the way of good medicine.

The new regulation – implemented New Year's Day after five years of hearings, delays and wrangling among insurance companies, regulators and consumer advocates – is widely hailed as a milestone in reducing mistakes because of miscommunication.

"This is really huge, especially in California where we're getting more and more diverse," said Martin Martinez, policy director for the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network. "Even if you speak English well, it's really hard to understand what your doctor is saying."

As many as 7 million Californians – about half of them enrolled in health maintenance organizations, or HMOs – lack English fluency and could benefit from the new language service.

Patients rights advocates applaud the new rules but fear non-English speakers won't be told about the help now available to them. To spread the word, the state is launching a publicity drive in the coming weeks.

"This law has been some time coming," said Anthony Wright, executive director of California Health Access. "Our big concern now is whether people have adequate notice about their rights and can actually use them."

Doctors' orders will now have to be translated, at least orally, into Spanish, Mandarin, Hmong, Russian – any spoken language.

The scope and cost of the task – estimated by insurers to be about \$25 million – make it the biggest regulation effort undertaken by the California Department of Managed Health Care, which oversees HMOs.

The law, Senate Bill 853, was signed in 2003 but shelved as part of a moratorium imposed by Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger when he took office. It was finally dusted off, but insurers balked at the cost.

"Obviously, we know this is a diverse state and people speak many different languages," said Nicole Kasabian Evans, spokeswoman for the California Association of Health Plans. The insurers' concern, she said, was about balancing access and affordability. Some insurers plan to contract out the language services.

Some of the building blocks were already in place because federal law requires health plans to offer interpreters to those enrolled in Medi-Cal or Healthy Families.

For years, larger hospitals have had interpreters standing by. Kaiser Permanente, for instance, has 50 at its Northern California facilities and has 3,400 employees with second-language skills.

But many patients did not have guaranteed access to interpreters.

For that reason, California's law is broad in its sweep. It requires health, dental and specialty insurers to provide subscribers with translators, at least by telephone, while visiting their doctor, pharmacist, ophthalmologist or dentist.

"The intent is that better communication leads to better health care. To the extent we can make that possible, we're going to work to do that," said Ben Singer, a spokesman for Anthem Blue Cross, which provides dental and medical insurance to 8 million Californians.

More than 40 percent of the state's 37 million residents speak a language other than English, according to U.S. census estimates. A fifth of the population say they do not speak English "very well."

The new law could help lift the burden from immigrants such as Natasha Vakulchik of Rancho Cordova, a pre-kindergarten teacher whose Russian-speaking family depends on her to translate.

"My parents use me, my parents-in-law use me. I translate for everybody," said Vakulchik, 30. "It's hard. You can't expect me to know everything.

"I don't know medical terms. Even if I know English well, half the time I didn't even know what they're talking about," she said, referring to doctors. "If they're talking about organs, I wouldn't even know what they are in Russian. Sometimes, they had to show me using pictures."

When her brother, hurt in an accident, couldn't understand why he was receiving letters and bills from the hospital and insurance company, Vakulchik tried to help.

The insurer "would not talk to me," she said. "Sometimes they would even hang up on me. They told me that my brother needed to be on the phone. I told them that he couldn't speak English, so how can he talk to them?"

Cindy Ehnes, director of the state Managed Health Care Department, said she was moved by the testimony at hearings across the state.

"It was an incredible eye-opener to me," she said. "Often these people who can't speak English are told to go home unless they bring somebody who can. It was like being treated by a system as if they had no consequence."

At a Los Angeles hearing in February 2006, Ehnes heard a Spanish-speaking woman describe how her cancer spread after going undetected in 2000 because doctors were examining the wrong breast – and how her request for a translator was ignored. Ehnes herself is a cancer survivor.

The woman returned to the hospital four years later when her cancer was already at an advanced stage. She brought her daughter to translate, but the sobbing child could not bear to tell her mother the severity of the cancer and merely said that things were fine.

"Nobody really tracks all of the errors being done because of language miscommunication and lack of language services," said Ellen Wu, executive director of Pan-Ethnic Health Network.

Meanwhile, the California Healthcare Interpreting Association in Sacramento is pushing for a certification program to ensure that interpreters used by health plans are well-versed in medical lingo and the languages they translate.

The new regulations require interpreters to have demonstrated proficiency but don't "say what that level of proficiency is and how it should be demonstrated," said Don Schinske, the association's executive director.

ShareThis

Call The Bee's Bobby Caina Calvin, (916) 321-1067.

Topic Tags

Related Topics

Anthony Wright **Health Care** **Health**
Insurance Health Maintenance Organizations
Kaiser Permanente New Year's Day **Rancho**
Cordova

Popular Topics

Alex Smith Arnold Schwarzenegger **Budget**
Deficit Darrell Steinberg Farrah Fawcett
Spending Cuts **State Budget**

About Comments

Reader comments on Sacbee.com are the opinions of the writer, not The Sacramento Bee. If you see an objectionable comment, click the "report abuse" button below it. We will delete comments containing inappropriate links, obscenities, hate speech, and personal attacks. Flagrant or repeat violators will be banned. See more about comments here.

What You Should Know About Comments on Sacbee.com

Sacbee.com is happy to provide a forum for reader interaction, discussion, feedback and reaction to our stories. However, we reserve the right to delete inappropriate comments or ban users who can't play nice. (See our full terms of service here.)

Here are some rules of the road:

- Keep your comments civil. Don't insult one another or the subjects of our articles. If you think a comment violates our guidelines click the "report abuse" button to notify the moderators. Responding to the comment will only encourage bad behavior.
- Don't use profanities, vulgarities or hate speech. This is a general interest news site. Sometimes, there are children present. Don't say anything in a way you wouldn't want your own child to hear.
- Do not attack other users; focus your comments on issues, not individuals.
- Stay on topic. Only post comments relevant to the article at hand. If you want to discuss an issue with a specific user, click on his profile name and send him a direct message.
- Do not copy and paste outside material into the comment box.
- Don't repeat the same comment over and over. We heard you the first time.
- Do not use the commenting system for advertising. That's spam and it isn't allowed.
- Don't use all capital letters. That's akin to yelling and not appreciated by the audience.

You should also know that The Sacramento Bee does not screen comments before they are posted. You are more likely to see inappropriate comments before our staff does, so we ask that you click the "report abuse" button to submit those comments for moderator review. You also may notify us via email at feedback@sacbee.com. Note the headline on which the comment is made and tell us the profile name of the user who made the comment. Remember, comment moderation is subjective. You may find some material objectionable that we won't and vice versa.

If you submit a comment, the user name of your account will appear along with it. Users cannot remove their own comments once they have submitted them, but you may ask our staff to retract one of your comments by sending an email to feedback@sacbee.com. Again, make sure you note the

headline on which the comment is made and tell us your profile name.

POWERED BY  Pluck

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Login](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

Comments:  209 Showing:



ddog707 wrote on 01/22/2009 07:03:06 AM:

OMG!!!!!!Can all you freaking IDIOT A__HOLE ADVOCATES quit thinking of ways to make my insurance costs go up please? GET OFF IT NOW. Now we have to spend tax \$\$ on a public service announcement? Hey Mr. Martinez, seems to me, that we need to curb immigration. And Natasha, your parents are using you as a CRUTCH. And please stick with pre-kindergarten untill you learn how to recognize organs. Thank you.

[Recommend \(0\)](#)



Huesero wrote on 01/15/2009 07:48:32 PM:

This article failed to point out, consistant with the liberal bias of its editors, that this is a huge expense to the taxpayers of CA. As a taxpayer for millions of people on MediCal, Medicare, and CA childrens services (the health insurers for 1/2 of CA, with the majority of its insured not proficient in English), this is a burdensome debt to society. This is also why the state of California is in bankruptcy. The state (we) will now continue to pay the bill for translation services amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars per year. The people benefiting from this service do not pay state or federal tax in most cases. Eventually, all insurers will place language into its contracts nullifying "their responsibility" under this law, and placing it upon the medical providers. The overhead cost to run a medical practice is already maxed-out. The day is coming for a walk-out in mass action against the tyrrany of this state (and the worthless DMHC).

[Recommend \(0\)](#)



ernesto wrote on 01/11/2009 10:10:05 PM:

They have insurance, they are legal immigrants. It is very easy to get interpreter on the phone of any language. Instructions and education are difficult for even English speakers. Having the patients understand their

meds, diagnosis, prevention, etc, will cut down on health care costs!!!!

[Recommend \(1\)](#)



RapierGnasher wrote on 01/09/2009 03:41:27 AM:

Echo chamber babies, as I said in earlier posts dudes, with similar laws the courts have found that a "reasonable effort" must be made to meet the law. Immigrants aren't to blame for all of your problemas. They provide fantastico cheap labor and economic expansion bebes.

[Recommend \(1\)](#)



Delawarebob wrote on 01/06/2009 02:21:32 PM:

I think this is a need to make ENGLISH the OFFICIAL language of the United States. Maybe if you get rid of the ILLEGAL ALIENS, this would help! What, you have 3 million ILLEGAL ALIENS in California and the cost to have them there is \$19 BILLION? Am I in the ball park? If you're an American citizen and can't speak ENGLISH, maybe you should consider going back to the country you came from so you can at least speak the language.

This illegal immigration has caused more problems than anyone could have ever imagined. When are they going to end?

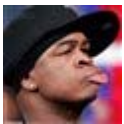
[Recommend \(0\)](#)



bibbysdaddy wrote on 01/06/2009 12:09:21 PM:

If you don't want to learn English, then don't use our services. If you can't learn English, then we don't need you in our country. This is just another ploy by the interpreting lobby to get more taxpayer money at a time when the State can't afford to waste any more.

[Recommend \(2\)](#)



TyroneShoelaces wrote on 01/06/2009 08:15:55 AM:

Hey, where can an English speaking citizen go to get medical care around here? So if I got this right, if some dude from the Izzy-Bizzy tribe located in the Amazon needs a tooth pulled, they gotta provide a translator. That would entail flyin' all the way to Izzy-Bizzy to find one of the six people on the planet that speaks Izzy-Bizzy. Hummmmm! Seems we got royally-screwed again. Excuse me, I gotta go press one for English.

[Recommend \(3\)](#)



alex27 wrote on 01/06/2009 05:27:17 AM:

Dont blame them illegals they pay taxes too, theyre always in strip clubs with



fake mexico IDs. Just blame it on those old, ugly, perverted white dudes that buys their mail brides from the philippines, thailand, mexico, ukraine ect..

[Recommend \(1\)](#)

More comments on this story: [1](#) [2](#) [3](#) [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#) [9](#) [10](#)

[Sacramento Mom Cures Skin Wrinkles](#)

I wasted more than \$1000
AskErinBrown.com

[San Francisco, CA Homes for Sale](#)

Free MLS Search: San Francisco homes for sale.
www.ziprealty.com

[Sacramento Dental](#)

Local, affordable, friendly dentist
Serving Sacramento and you.
www.promenadedentist.com

Ads by Yahoo!