

Promoting Language Access in Medi-Cal Dental: A Success Story

California Pan-Ethnic Health Network (CPEHN) is connecting local community-based organizations with statewide advocates to effectively work together for change in California's public oral health system, Medi-Cal Dental.

Background

CPEHN and its grassroots community partners have worked to improve oral health access for adults in California for many years. Many community members have experienced huge gaps in care and high costs for important dental procedures that have resulted in physical and mental health issues, unemployment, and the furthering of health disparities. In 2017, the state finally took steps to improve this gap by restoring adult dental benefits. As a result of the restoration of adult dental benefits in California, Network members have worked together to ensure the implementation is smooth and eligible individuals are utilizing services.

Leveraging Networks to Amplify Community Voices

In 2019, CPEHN grassroots partner Mixteco Indigena Community Organizing Project (MICOP) reported that many community members were struggling to access dental care through Medi-Cal Dental. Existing state law establishes a right to language assistance requirements along with specific language access protections, including the right to qualified interpreters. However, community partners reported that language access issues were preventing limited English proficiency (LEP) consumers from finding a provider through the Medi-Cal Dental Telephone Service Center (TSC), which failed to provide any kind of interpretation assistance for languages other than Spanish despite state law.

Working with members of the California Oral Health Progress and Equity Network (CA-OPEN), CPEHN led a group of 28 organizations including community organizing groups, legal services, interpretation services, and other statewide advocacy groups with a diverse constituency to raise these concerns to top-level state leadership, including the Medi-Cal Dental Director and California Department of Health Care Services Director. In response to a formal comment letter outlining the coalition's concerns, the Department committed to improving its policies and procedures to promote language access, including:

- Updating its automated phone system to include a greater selection of languages other than English and Spanish;
- Creating a language access workgroup starting in October 2019 to develop solutions to the identified issues;
- Hosting a series of webinars for advocates about the DHCS TSC; and
- Translating member correspondence materials into additional languages other than Spanish.

Moving Forward

By connecting community-based organizations with deep connections to local underserved communities to broad networks of advocates, CPEHN was able to amplify an important community concern resulting in state decision makers taking action to address these issues. Going forward, CPEHN will continue working closely with grassroots partners and CA-OPEN to monitor these and other critical issues, raising community issues and mobilizing advocates to respond.