Partnering with a Community College to Train Medical Interpreters
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Innovation

Introduction/context

In 2013, 25.1 million individuals in the U.S. were considered Limited English Proficient (LEP). LEP patients are at risk for reduced access to health care, limited understanding of diagnoses and treatment plans, longer hospital stays, and increased rates of medical errors and misdiagnoses. Evidence suggests that these health disparities can be mitigated by the use of trained professional interpreters. LEP patients who use qualified interpreters report higher satisfaction with care, experience better quality of care, and have improved clinical outcomes.

Considering the valuable role that interpreters can play in reducing health disparities that affect LEP populations in New Haven, we partnered with a local community college to develop a training program for medical interpreters. Recent federal incentives have created an opportunity for community colleges across the country to meet growing workforce demands in health care. Further, key elements of the core mission of community colleges: (1) To allow culturally and socioeconomically diverse populations access to education, and (2) To serve the needs of local communities, are well aligned with the goal of addressing health disparities.

Description of policy or practice innovation

Through the partnership we have created to develop a medical interpreter training program we plan: (1) To address health disparities affecting the LEP population in our area, (2) To create health professions training opportunities for a diverse disadvantaged student population, and (3) To disseminate our partnership model to health care institutions and community colleges across the country. We recently completed the pilot year of our program, with 17 students completing the course. The course spanned 11 weeks, with curriculum designed to teach the fundamentals of interpreting in professional environments by incorporating didactics and regular role play/simulation experiences. Course content was designed in accordance with the National Standards for Healthcare Interpreter Training Programs and through consultation of experienced interpreters.

Evaluation/impact

We developed an employer needs assessment to inform our training curriculum. We surveyed 15 employers in the Greater New Haven area that currently hire or would consider hiring medical interpreters. Our study sample was comprised of a diverse group of healthcare facilities (hospitals, ambulatory care clinics, federally qualified health centers, mental/behavioral clinics) and organizations accessing health care for clients. We administered an electronic survey to participants, asking about interpreter hiring requirements and preferences. Several employers expressed the desire to hire interpreters that provide cultural mediation or navigation (n=10) and interpreters with “stackable credentials” or another skill set useful within their organizations (n=8). The findings have provide valuable insight for our curriculum. We are currently conducting in-depth individual interviews with these organizations to learn more about how they provide language access to patients, challenges they face, and the role that interpreters have in this model. We plan to obtain feedback from graduates of our pilot course and determine their experiences in job placement.

Discussion/implications

By developing a partnership between an academic healthcare center and community college, we have trained and equipped members of our community to address health disparities among them. This partnership offers an innovative and sustainable model for promoting health equity among LEP populations.