

# Expanding Language Interpretation Services in Health Care

## GOAL

To ensure equitable access to health care for people who do not speak English or French

## Ontarians need access to health care in a language that they can understand

People in Ontario who do not speak English or French fluently have barriers when they try to access health care. Without adequate language support, the quality of their health care may be severely compromised. Access to trained interpreters improves health care access and outcomes. The Government of Ontario could effectively address language barriers by scaling up local innovative face-to-face and telephone service models with trained interpreters to deliver on the promise of excellent care for all.

## Patients with language barriers face poor health care access

According to data from Statistics Canada, in 2016, more than 25% of Ontarians had a mother tongue other than English or French and 15% of Ontarians spoke a language other than English or French at home. In the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), approximately 25% of people speak a language other than English or French at home, and 4% of people do not speak English or French at all.

Language barriers are a significant challenge in ensuring equitable access to health care. When patients are unable to effectively communicate with their health care providers because of language barriers, health care quality may be negatively affected. Patients with language barriers may face challenges such as not being able to discuss their health concerns with health care providers, resulting in miscommunication or misdiagnosis. Research reports patients who do not have adequate language support are more likely to be readmitted to the hospital or receive inappropriate care.

Because language barriers may affect patient' understanding of their health challenges and the treatment options, it can also undermine the provision of informed consent, a legal requirement that protects patient autonomy. Health providers may resort to family members to obtain consent, undermining privacy for the patient and raising concerns about conflicts of interest.

## Trained interpreters are essential to address language barriers in health care

Ontario's health care system is only beginning to address access needs for people who do not speak English or French. There is no provincially coordinated language interpretation system in Ontario. However, individual organizations and health authorities have taken some significant steps to implement language interpretation services and improve access for patients. For example, over 30 organizations in the GTA have explored telephone interpretation to facilitate communication between patients, providers and their families. While some use trained interpreters for this work, other health care organizations use untrained staff or volunteers.

The most effective method of addressing language barriers is to use trained interpreters. Such interpreters have received specific training that includes information about medical terminology, an ability to clearly communicate complex and nuanced information, an understanding of how to work with patients and providers, and an understanding of health care organizations' systems and processes. Some organizations have been moving towards certification for their interpreters and have begun providing in-house professional development opportunities for interpreters. The use of trained interpreters is an effective intervention that addresses language barriers and contributes to higher quality care. Effective interpretation can improve access to and quality of health care, ensure informed consent, and maintain privacy.



## Opportunities to advance trained interpretation in the Greater Toronto Area

To promote access to health care for patients who do not speak English or French, trained interpreters could be provided through investments in coordinated language interpretation services. Coordinated interpretation services provide a centralized way for patients, families and providers alike to access language interpretation services on-site in health care settings. It offers a clear and cost-effective process for patients and families who want to access language supports.

In the GTA, we have seen many promising examples of coordinated language interpretation services in action. This includes programs at the Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH), the Hospital for Sick Children, and the William Osler Health Care System. An example of a model that has established language interpretation services is the telephone-based Language Services Toronto program. It has been implemented in hospitals and some community organizations across the Toronto Central Local Health Integration Network (TC LHIN). This model has been evaluated and could point towards a potential model for replication in other jurisdictions in Ontario, depending on the context and circumstance.

Coordinated language interpretation services enable health care institutions and providers to have immediate access to interpretation in a wide range of languages, across multiple health care settings in many different modes. Ultimately, in the Ontario context, a health care system that employs a range of modes of interpretation such as trained in-person interpreters, telephone-based interpretation and accredited bilingual providers, among others, can move towards more coordinated and effective interpretation services to improve equitable access to health care services for our multi-lingual population.

## Ontario needs to expand language interpretation services to promote health equity

To ensure equitable access to health care services for all Ontarians, access to trained interpreters and coordinated language interpretation services are needed. This enables everyone to access health care services in a language that they can understand, through an intervention that is effective, feasible, and viable. The examples listed above point the way forward. The Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care can build on these innovations by making investments to promote and expand the use of trained interpreters and coordinated language interpretation services. This will enable them to address the need for language accessibility in our health care system across the province.

### REFERENCES

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