

## **Assessing Language and Skills of Health Care Interpreters**

Hablamos Juntos (We Speak Together), a national program of The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, is working to address the challenges that health care providers face in caring for limited to no English speaking patients by forging connections between providers and the rapidly growing Latino market. Hablamos Juntos is investing \$10 million in 10 demonstration sites around the country. These Demonstration Sites are piloting a set of tools designed for individuals who interpret in health care settings who want to improve their language skills and their ability to interpret. The Spanish language and interpreter assessment tools are the first valid and reliable tools to be developed for heritage speakers (speakers who have learned their non-English languages at home and have not been formally educated in these languages) working in health care settings. These tools will be used by Hablamos Juntos demonstration sites to assess and improve the quality of Spanish health interpreters.

Currently the majority of people being used as interpreters are heritage speakers, meaning they learned the language at home and have had no formal training. A heritage speaker however does not necessarily have the vocabulary necessary to interpret the kind of language used during a doctor's visit. A person's ability to speak the language does not ensure that they will be able to perform well in elevated situations because interpreting requires more than language ability. Formal training would give interpreters a conceptual understanding of what they were translating ensuring that the information was being properly translated in both language and meaning.

Often overlooked is fact that most people who hire interpreters do so because they are not bilingual and lack the ability to assess the interpreter's skills. They are then forced to depend on self report (e.g. I am fluent) or untested references (e.g. an untested bilingual employee saying yes he is good). This program will help combat these problems as it is a tool that can be used to assess the ability and quality of interpreters.

The L&ISA program was designed to test the abilities of a broad range of individuals and positions. It can assess the skills of individuals working as interpreters, bilingual workers paid a differential for bilingual ability expected to use their language ability on the job, bilingual workers who are sometimes expected to function as interpreters and interpreter training program candidates.

Mastery of language does not guarantee that an individual will be able to function as an interpreter. Until now, no commercially-available tool assessed language proficiency in health care. Further, no commercially-available test is designed for Heritage speakers. Because the strength and quality of language learned informally varies greatly, different tools within the program have been developed to test individuals based on their personal language background.

Between January and May, Hablamos Juntos plans to assess eight hundred individuals from the groups mentioned (e.g. interpreters, bilingual workers, etc.) Upon the completion of this pilot phase, Hablamos Juntos will be able to describe the four assessment tests used, what skills are being evaluated, how the tools were developed and important results.