

Group says hospitals are lost in translation Rallies for interpreters planned

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WATERBURY — A group representing religious, labor, renter and small business in-terests in the Naugatuck Valley has spent years trying to convince four area hospitals to offer interpreters for people who don't speak English.

The Naugatuck Valley Project has held meetings in churches, homes and community centers and has lobbied hospital administrators. Two hospitals have hired part-time translators, but Naugatuck Valley Project staff say there's a long way to go before interpreting needs are fully met.

The group is planning several rallies on the Waterbury Green beginning in January, trying to bring attention to the issue.



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There have been days Isomar Vazquez, 17, has missed school to interpret for her mother, beginning when she was 6 years old, she said.

“The life of a person is in danger when there is no medical interpretation,” said Juan Marrero, a member of the medical interpreting committee for the NVP.

The four hospitals targeted by the group — Griffin Hospital in Derby; Charlotte Hungerford in Torrington; along with Saint Mary's Hospital and Waterbury Hospital in Waterbury — all offer interpreting in 200 languages through a 24-hour phone service.

Some, like Charlotte Hungerford and Griffin, have trained staff members to interpret on a limited basis. But a great deal of translation continues to be conducted over telephone lines.

That's small comfort to someone in an emergency room in excruciating pain with a broken limb who has to get on the phone with someone to explain what is happening Marrero said.

And the language barrier creates other problems for non-English-speakers seeking health care.

Wilby High School student Isomar Vazquez, 17, recalls skipping school to interpret for her mother, who suffers from diabetes and other chronic health problems. This began when she was only 6.

Vazquez and others shared their struggles to access health care during a meeting of the medical interpretation subcommittee of the Naugatuck Valley Project on Ludlow Street.

Nelsida Collado of Waterbury said she had spoken with an illegal immigrant who miscarried a baby in an emergency room because she was unable to communicate with a doctor.

Marrero said unqualified people, including janitors or clerks, are sometimes called in to interpret. The fact that someone speaks the language doesn't mean they can interpret complicated medical language, he said. A study by the Connecticut Health Foundation in 2005 found 22,000 people with limited English proficiency enrolled in the state's Medicaid program. The study determined that it would cost \$4.7 million to provide medical interpreters for these patients in a single year.

Armed with that study, the Hispanic Health Council helped convince the state legislature to approve \$4.7 million for translating in 2007 and 2008. But the program never got off the ground. Under budget pressure, Gov. M. Jodi Rell cut \$1.2 million from the appropriation and the rest has been frozen.

Under federal law, hospitals have to provide some type of medical interpreting, even if it is only via telephone, and the costs come out of ever-tighter budgets.

The phone line costs \$2-\$3 per minute.

“To have a full-time medical interpreter would be wonderful, but it's not practical at this point,” said Virginia Potrepka, manager of patient services for Waterbury Hospital.

Frequency of use of the phone line varies widely among the hospitals. Griffin averages less than one call a

day, according to hospital spokesman Kenneth Roberts. At Charlotte Hungerford the average use is 1-2 calls per day, or 30-40 per month. Saint Mary's averages 137 calls a month, or about 20 hours of interpretation service.

Waterbury Hospital averages 120 calls a month, in up to 10 different languages.

The hospitals that have interpreters usually have them performing other duties.

Griffin Hospital's Spanish interpreter also performs patient outreach when there is no interpreting.

Charlotte Hungerford has two staff members who are cross-trained in Spanish and Portuguese thanks to a grant from Connecticut Health Foundation.

Marrero said his group will continue its fight until there is a better system of medical in-terpreting in place.

"We have the flag in our hands and have to do a good deal," Marrero said.



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The Naugatuck Valley Project has been advocating for interpreters at local hospitals. Behind the drive are, from left, Elizabeth Rosa, a staff organizer for the group; Nelsida Collado of Waterbury; and Juan Marrero, executive council 2nd vice president with the NVP.