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Many Atlanta area hospitals not adequately serving non-English speakers

Report details barriers to health care for those with limited proficiency

Atlanta, Ga. – Many Georgia hospitals aren't doing enough to ensure accessibility for non-English speakers, according to a report released this week by Georgia Watch's Hospital Accountability Project. Most hospitals throughout the state are required to follow basic language accessibility regulations set forth by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act, the Affordable Care Act, and the Indigent Care Trust Fund.

But too many are doing the bare minimum to lower barriers for those with limited English proficiency, if anything at all. In a recent survey of more than 90 Georgia hospital websites, only about one-sixth had information on available financial aid programs in a language other than English and Spanish. In diverse communities, such as DeKalb and Gwinnett counties, many languages are common, such as Chinese, Vietnamese and Burmese.

“Not only do we need hospitals offering translated materials in multiple languages, but we would like to see greater initiative by hospitals in providing interpreters trained to assist patients from a variety of cultural backgrounds,” **said Holly Lang, Hospital Accountability Project Manager.** “It will not only improve care but it will also help hospital bottom lines by resulting in less medical errors and duplicated or unnecessary services and tests.”

In addition to detailing language access issues at Georgia's hospitals, the report puts forth four main policy recommendations to help lower barriers to non-English speakers. They are:

- **Compliance with existing laws:** Hospitals and other providers should ensure they act in accordance with existing regulations to best serve their patients and themselves. This includes the translation of all key written materials and signage indicating the availability of financial assistance and other key hospital programs and policies.
- **Education of staff on language access policies and programs:** Hospital and provider staff that work with patient accounts should be made familiar with policies, laws and obligations the hospital has to the patient in regards to translation and interpretation services. Hospitals should also ensure that staff who may greet a patient – such as those at an information desk – should be well-equipped to address the language needs of a patient by either being bi- or multilingual themselves or by having immediate access to adequate language services.
- **Cultural competency training:** Hospitals and providers should require relevant staff to undergo cultural competency training as to best equip their staff with the necessary skills and resources to adequately address the needs of patients who know a limited amount of English.
- **Thoughtful community health needs assessments:** Private nonprofit hospitals should make efforts to include non-English speaking populations in their tri-annual community health needs assessments, and develop appropriate programs to address that population's particular and unique needs.

As Georgia continues to attract a growing population of residents with limited English proficiency, Georgia Watch continues to push for increased efforts on the part of hospitals to ensure all patients are made aware of their medical and financial options.

“No matter the patient's language, hospitals have an obligation to their communities to practice fair billing practices and equal access to care,” **Lang said.** “All patients deserve affordable, accessible care delivered in a manner they understand.”

To download a PDF copy of The Georgia Hospital Accountability Project's *Language Access at Hospitals* report, please visit GAHAP.org.

Founded in 2002, Georgia Watch is a nonprofit, nonpartisan 501-(c)(3) watchdog group focusing on consumer education and research in the areas of health care, insurance, identity theft, consumer energy issues and personal finance. Visit www.GeorgiaWatch.org for more information.