Integrating Cultural Competency Initiatives at Lehigh Valley Health Network, Pennsylvania

Background
Based in the Pennsylvania cities of Allentown, Bethlehem and Hazleton, Lehigh Valley Health Network includes three full-service hospitals across five campuses, a children’s hospital, 12 community health centers and a 1,100-member physician group. A foundation of culturally competent services existed within the network for many years, including telephonic interpreter services, multilingual educational materials and unit-specific cultural sensitivity projects.

The impetus for a significant organizational culture change to ensure the delivery of culturally and linguistically appropriate care began following a patient-centered experience retreat in 2006. Former patients, their family members and community representatives spoke about medical encounters when they believed health providers and staff members could have been more attentive to their cultural backgrounds and language preferences. This transformational event launched a networkwide cultural competency project as part of Lehigh Valley Health Network’s patient- and family-centered care initiative. Led by the network’s Cultural Awareness Leadership Council, cultural competency has been further integrated into Lehigh Valley Health Network operations, including REAL data collection, interpreter services, quality improvement, and educational programming.

Intervention
Community members are integral partners as Lehigh Valley Health Network addresses health care disparities and delivers equitable care. For example, several innovative programs have been developed to provide culturally sensitive services to the local Latino population, which has nearly doubled in Allentown between 2000 and 2010 (approximately 24,500 additional people). As the need for medical interpreters outpaced the supply of locally trained interpreters, the health network partnered with community members to develop a solution. In 2007, the network adopted new strategies for cultural competency and community integration including Las Palabras (The Words), a collaborative effort with Community Exchange—a time-banking project of the Office of Health Systems Research and Innovation—that educates community members to serve as medical interpreters along with a trained network of employees.

To further advance the health care and well-being of the region’s adult Latino community, the Centro de Salud LatinoAmericano program was created to serve as a bilingual and bicultural physician practice in internal medicine. In addition to delivering compassionate, integrated and culturally sensitive care, Centro de Salud physicians, advanced practice clinicians and staff members provide educational and outreach activities to empower community members to increase their self-confidence and skills in managing and preventing chronic illness.

Results
Through Las Palabras, 63 community members successfully completed medical interpreter training and have provided more than 2,700 hours of interpretation for patients receiving care throughout the network. These interpreters supplement the seven full-time interpreters and approximately 150 employees from various departments who are cross-trained interpreters, serving all campuses in the health network.
Caring for more than 1,600 patients, Centro de Salud emphasizes chronic disease screening and management. As a result, 98 percent of patients have received body mass index (BMI) counseling; 97 percent of patients have received tobacco use screening; 84 percent of patients have received mammograms; 58 percent of patients have received influenza vaccine; 75 percent of diabetic patients have an A1C level below 8; 92 percent of diabetic patients have received neuropathy screening; and 58 percent have received colorectal cancer screening.

Contact Information
Lehigh Valley Health Network
Judith Natale Sabino
Diversity/Cultural Awareness Liaison
(484) 884-0120
Judith.Sabino@LVHN.org