

'Brokers' Save Washington Interpreter Services

By Mary Branham Dusenberry

Better quality, less cost.

That's what Washington experienced after it implemented the **Spoken Language Brokered Interpreter Services** in January 2003. The program earned Washington one of eight national CSG Innovations awards.

Thomas R. Gray, manager of the Office of Transportation and Interpreter Services, said the program—which provides interpreter services for Washington's estimated 160,000 Limited English Proficient Medicaid clients—has saved the state \$1 million a month.

The move to implement a "brokered" service also saved the program. Gray said the legislature had cut the program from its proposed budget, but reinstated it after the new model was proposed.

"We saved more than double what we were required to save under the legislation," Gray said. "In the first six months, we were supposed to save \$2.6 million, and we saved over \$5 million. In the following biennium, we were supposed to save \$12 million and we saved over \$24 million."

The interpreter service was moved within state government, which implemented a brokerage model similar to the state's medical transportation service. That means the interpreter services are scheduled through a broker, which serves as a "gatekeeper," Gray said. The broker reviews requests for a medical interpreter, as well as the services rendered to ensure the state's Medicaid program is billed correctly for services.

Before this program began in 2003, medical providers would contact an agency, which would send an interpreter to the provider at the time of the Medicaid client's appointment. The bill would be submitted to the agency, which would then submit the bill to the state for payment.

"An interpreter could generate a lot of bills and it could go through the system without appropriate oversight," Gray said. "There really was no gatekeeper function in paying the bills. We were doing prepayment review. You can only call medical providers to verify so many appointments (before it becomes a burden for them).

"Basically, there were a lot of extra billings being generated that we didn't believe were appropriate," Gray said. "The amount of charges seemed to be exaggerated."

The brokers now ensure that the clients served through the program are Medicaid clients, and that the billing is submitted correctly, according to Gray. The same call center infrastructure brokers used covers both the medical transportation and interpreter services, cutting costs for both programs, he said.

Fast Facts

- The Spoken Language Brokered Interpreter Services established strict controls over the scheduling process for medical interpreter services.
- Washington is the only state to use a "brokerage model" for providing interpreter services for Medicaid clients.
- The Spoken Language Brokered Interpreter Services has increased quality, lowered costs, decreased complaints and is considered a model for the delivery of other services.

Gray said the new system allows for sanctions of interpreters "if they do anything we don't believe is appropriate. We have a built-in mechanism to monitor the quality of the services to make sure they're appropriate."

The broker also can increase resources by recruiting more medical interpreters. That's important, Gray said, because Washington has long been a top relocation spot for new immigrants to the U.S.

"We really believe in this model because it's really worked for us," Gray said.

He said other states have contacted Washington to gather information about the program. Gray recommends other states considering interpreter services for Medicaid clients should make sure there is a gatekeeper function. "Make sure the services are high quality and are provided appropriately," he said.

Washington requires medical and social service interpreters to be certified, through a state testing service.

"The federal law says you have to ensure effective communications," Gray said. "To do it just because of that limits the program. The real issue is when people understand what they're being told medically, we believe we get better medical outcomes.

"We also believe we will save more money," he said. "If people have better medical outcomes, they're not going to the emergency room as much. We're not paying out unnecessary money for medical care. It really is the best of all worlds."

To learn more about the Spoken Language Brokered Interpreter Services, visit <https://fortress.wa.gov/dshs/maa/InterpreterServices/>.

