



Law Will Help Limited English Speakers

by David Gorn

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On Monday, Gov. Jerry Brown (D) signed a bill ([AB 389](#)) that will require hospitals to post online their state-required plans for assisting limited English speakers and their families.

AB 389, by Assembly member Ed Chau (D-Monterey Park), builds on the current requirement that hospitals formulate a plan for helping limited English proficient (LEP) patients.

"For years now, hospitals have been required to meet needs of the LEP population, and to create a plan to show how they're going to do it," said Sarah de Guia, executive director of the California Pan-Ethnic Health Network, a not-for-profit advocacy group based in Oakland.

About 5% of California hospitals' patient population has limited English proficiency, de Guia said.

"The problem with the current law is, nobody knows what those plans are. There's no accountability there," she said.

"But with the Internet, that information is easily provided, so hospitals now will be required to put those plans online, and to post notices [in five languages] about the availability of language services."

Hospitals haven't opposed the measure this session, in part because it could actually help them reach a part of the patient population that can be problematic for hospital systems, de Guia said.

"I think it will benefit hospitals," she said. "In order to meet consumer needs, they can really look at what's being done, see what the gaps are and how to better provide services. "This could be critical to them."

And it's certainly critical for de Guia and her organization, which sponsored the bill. "This will better inform us about where the gaps are [in care due to poor language services]," de Guia said. "Not having that information, we don't know where to begin on this."

"Millions of Californians are not proficient in English, and this law will help them find culturally and linguistically appropriate health care when they need it," said Assembly member Chau in a written statement.

"Language barriers can result in serious consequences, such as higher rates of hospitalization, drug complications and not returning for follow-ups after an emergency room visit," he said. "The action taken by the governor will give all patients the ability to better navigate our hospital system, which will result in improved health outcomes."