

# SACRAMENTO BUSINESS JOURNAL

March 16, 2007

EL DORADO PLACER SACRAMENTO YOLO

VOL. 24, NO. 2

## New online exam will evaluate ability of medical interpreters

**KATHY ROBERTSON** | STAFF WRITER

A Sacramento translation company has teamed up with a language testing specialist in Oregon to launch an online exam to make sure bilingual medical staff can handle the specialized lingo and cultural complications.

The joint venture between Language World Services Inc. and Language Learning Solutions of Eugene, Ore., was announced last month, days before new state regulations were released that require health plans to provide interpretive services in doctors' offices and clinics.

The new test could be the first to gauge interpreters' ability to handle healthcare terms and cultural disparities. The language services field is poised for significant growth as the diverse U.S. population gets older and as more businesses are required to provide interpretive services.

"Even though the activity of interpreting between a clinician and a patient is probably as old as the species, healthcare interpretation, as a stand-alone profession, is only about 20 years old," said Don Schinske, executive director of the California Healthcare Interpreting Association in Sacramento. "What we have not seen yet are good tools to assess an interpreter's ability."

The joint venture is likely to prompt additional growth at a local company. Language World spun off a new business last year that allows interpretation agencies and hospitals to schedule appointments over the Internet. Fluency Inc. is now running the scheduling program in Nebraska, Tennessee and Michigan on a pilot basis, with other sites pending.

Parent company Language World Services will move to larger digs at 7220 Fair Oaks Blvd. next month to accommodate growth. With a full-time staff of seven, the company contracts with 350 interpreters to provide services in 60 languages.

The company logged in more than 100 appointments a day in 2006 and expects more this year.

### MEDICAL LINGO, CULTURAL SENSITIVITY

Almost 52 million people — more than 19 percent of the U.S. population — speak a language other than English at home, according to an October 2006 study by the Health Research and Education Trust. Sixty-three percent of



**Interpreter Mei Kowalski helps patient Meiling Pang communicate with physical therapist Philip Hixson at Kaiser's South Sacramento Medical Center.**

**Dennis McCoy** |  
Sacramento Business  
Journal

hospitals surveyed encountered patients with limited English proficiency daily or weekly; 17 percent more did so monthly. More than 75 percent said they most frequently used staff interpreters to translate.

Regulations announced March 1 by the California Department of Managed Health Care require each of the 100 health plans overseen by the state to offer language assistance to their members. The move is expected to bring new focus on how well bilingual employees do the job.

California requires state certification for medical-legal interpreters who translate medical evaluations of patients who have filed workers' compensation claims or personal injury lawsuits, but testing has been suspended through June 30 to review the program and improve the test.

There's no similar standard for the rest of the healthcare market; language agencies do the best they can.

"We know the folks who have been interpreting for years," said Bettie Lee Taylor, president of Total Translating Services Inc. in Sacramento. "I make sure we feel they are competent."

The state test now under review is not easy, and pass rates have been low, she said.

### PROMOTING CONSISTENCY

"Testing interpreters is really unwieldy," said Bill Glasser, founder of Language World Services. "I get my best Russian interpreter to test (others), but it's not consistent. Some may just have a bad day and not do well."

Searching for a fix, he linked up with

Dave Bong, chief executive officer of Language Learning Solutions. The company, affiliated with University of Oregon's Center for Applied Second Language Studies, has developed a way to test English-as-a-Second-Language proficiency among schoolchildren over the Internet.

Both men realized there was a significant market if they worked together on a product they've dubbed "MITI," for Medical Interpreter Test on the Internet.

"His side will be to do the sales and marketing," Bong said. "We'll do the technical part, and in between, we'll both work on test development and design."

The test is expected to be available in late summer, after data gathered in a pilot is analyzed and adjustments made. The pilot is free, but the test will ultimately cost \$75 per person.

"There are plenty of tests for language ability, but it turns out, healthcare interpreting includes that and several other components, like medical terms and the ability to bridge the cultural issues," Schinske said. "I haven't seen anything like Bill's test yet, and the buzz I caught for it was very positive."

Kaiser Permanente is Glasser's biggest local client. Kaiser is familiar with the test and might use it to vet some of its 350-odd bilingual staffers in the region who are not union members covered by another assessment tool, said Ryan Darke, chair of Kaiser's Northern Sacramento Valley Diversity Team.

krobertson@bizjournals.com | 916-558-7869.