

Hospital Switches to Online Interpreters

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Hospital switches to online interpreters, Wenatchee police eye the service

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WENATCHEE — Until last month, Central Washington Hospital contracted to have a certified Spanish-speaking interpreter stationed at the hospital, and others on call to respond when needed.

This is the equipment used at Central Washington Hospital's dialysis center for Systematech's interpreter services. Systematech is a local company that employs 12 people and provides English/Spanish translation 24 hours per day, seven days per week. (World photo/Kelly Gillin)

Now, at the touch of a computer screen, an interpreter is available immediately, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In seconds, an interpreter answers, and a live picture of them comes up on the computer screen, alongside a picture of the patient who's in front of the screen.

After a one-month trial, it was an easy decision to sign up for inDemand Interpreting, said Jack Powers, the hospital's director of human resources. Offered by a new Wenatchee company called Systematech, the program is easy to use, faster and cheaper than in-person interpreters and, surprisingly, patients seem as comfortable with a computer screen interpreter as they do with one in the room, he said.

Community Choice, a consortium of North Central Washington hospitals and clinics, is looking to expand the service to its other members, and interpreters at those health care facilities can join in the network and interpret for others as well. Mid-Valley Hospital in Omak and North Valley Hospital in Tonasket are now planning to switch, said Jesus Hernandez, Community Choice executive director. He said it's

particularly good for small hospitals, which may not get enough business for a full-time interpreter, and whose patients may personally know their interpreter and appreciate the option of using someone they don't know.

The Wenatchee Police Department is also testing it, with a computer in its lobby and one in a patrol car. Sgt. Cherie Smith said she's not sure when the department will make a decision. But having an interpreter available at all times would be a big improvement over what's available to non-English-speaking residents now, she said.

"Sometimes we have a bilingual officer on duty, and some days we don't," Smith said. If it's not a serious matter, police may wait until someone inside the department can handle it. "Sometimes, people have to wait a whole day for someone to be on duty. I'm thinking of one case, a lady had her dog stolen, and she found her dog and she wanted to tell us, 'This is where my dog is.' But no one could understand her, so she had to wait a day to get her dog back," she said.

Powers said hospital patients sometimes waited 20 or 30 minutes for an interpreter — now it's instant.

He said during the testing phase, Central Washington Hospital used the online interpreters 153 times in one week, for a total of 568 minutes. That's an average of 22 calls per day, with each call less than four minutes long.

From that trial with four interpreter stations, the hospital is expanding to at least 17 stations, including the hospital's dialysis center and home care services. Powers said the hospital will still keep an interpreter at the hospital, particularly for emergencies, and interpreters from Systematech will also come to the hospital when requested.

He said initial costs for the online service will be higher due to set-up, but over time, the hospital will save 20 to 30 percent on its interpreting costs.

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