Children's Hospital of Philadelphia PolicyLab

A Secret Shopper Study of Language Accessibility of Community-based Behavioral Health Services for Children in Families Who Speak Spanish and English

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Objective: The objective of this study was to compare outpatient behavioral health scheduling for children in Spanish-speaking families in Pennsylvania with that for children in families who speak English.

Study design: We made paired English and Spanish telephone calls to outpatient behavioral health facilities using a standardized script, describing a simulated, stable, Medicaid-insured child. Facilities were identified using the Pennsylvania Department of Human Services Online Provider Directory for Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services, which had 288 outpatient facilities with nonduplicate telephone numbers. An English-language caller following a script made up to 2 call attempts per facility from December 2019 through February 2020. The 126 facilities that did not answer the phone, accept Medicaid, or see children were removed. A Spanish-language caller then made up to 2 scripted call attempts to the 162 remaining facilities. The primary outcome was whether the facility tried to schedule an appointment for the simulated adolescent.

Results: A total of 125 facilities answered both English- and Spanish-language calls. For the English-language caller, 71% of facilities attempted to schedule an appointment and 100% communicated in the caller's preferred language. For the Spanish-language caller, 24% attempted to schedule an appointment ($P < .001$) and 25% communicated in the caller's preferred language ($P < .001$).

Conclusions: Among outpatient behavioral health facilities for Medicaid-insured children in Pennsylvania, there were inequities in access to appointments for families who speak Spanish compared with English. This is a modifiable barrier to care. Community-based behavioral health care for children should strengthen language access training, contracting, and oversight.

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