



New law will require pharmacies to provide translation services

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Catalina Martinez, a native New Yorker and longtime Queens resident, regularly fills prescriptions for her family at her local Ridgewood pharmacy. Martinez speaks Spanish fluently, but has limited proficiency in English. She often has trouble understanding the English-only instructions printed on her medications and once was hospitalized because she overdosed on her prescribed antibiotic.

Martinez is not alone. Nearly 1.8 million city residents have limited English proficiency, accounting for almost 22 percent of the entire city population. Many New Yorkers speak English as a second or third language and can have trouble safely following the instructions on their prescription bottles.

Without the help of a local pharmacist who can translate medical instructions, New Yorkers with limited English proficiency are often left to fend for themselves — guessing dosages and approximating quantities while trying to make safe medical decisions for themselves or their families.

And it can be easy to misunderstand instructions in another language. For example, if a Spanish-speaking patient reads the English word “once” as the Spanish word for “eleven,” which is spelled the same way, he or she could potentially ingest a fatal dose of medication.

Taking medications should not be a guessing game, no matter what language you speak. Our new bill, the Language Access in Pharmacies Act, would require local pharmacies to translate medical instructions into various languages in certain city neighborhoods.

The LAPA stipulates that, if at least 1 percent of the population living in a pharmacy’s community district speaks a language other than English, the pharmacy must translate medical instructions into various languages. The pharmacy is also required to provide free oral interpretation and translation services to customers.

This means a business owner in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, can get his prescriptions translated into Russian and a granddaughter in Chinatown can now breathe easy because she knows her grandmother is getting medical instructions in Chinese.

Under the LAPA, every pharmacy would record the preferred language for individuals who fill prescriptions regularly, as well as if interpretation or translation services were needed. Pharmacies would also post notifications about the rights of New Yorkers to free language assistance from the pharmacy.

The LAPA has drawn support from groups citywide, including Make the Road New York and New York Lawyers for the Public Interest, who helped draft the bill, as well as the New York Immigration Coalition and the New York Academy of Medicine.

It is co-sponsored by Council members Maria del Carmen Arroyo (D-Bronx), Gale Brewer (D-Manhattan), Alan Gerson (D-Manhattan), Letitia James (D-Brooklyn), John Liu (D-Flushing), Annabel Palma (D-Bronx), James Sanders Jr. (D-Laurelton) and Thomas White (D-South Ozone Park).

We cannot continue to allow so many New Yorkers to be put in danger every time they fill out a prescription. For New Yorkers with limited English proficiency, we have an opportunity to both eliminate the anxiety of filling a prescription and help them make safer medical choices.

This is not about political correctness, it is about finding common sense solutions to a problem many New Yorkers face: providing safe access to vital medication. Along with helping a lot of people, it will not cost the city a lot of money and will help benefit local pharmacies that will be able to expand their customer base to include the 1.8 million New Yorkers with limited English language skills.

In a city that prides itself on diversity, pharmacies should provide these needed translation services. If even a few words of a vital medical instruction are lost on a patient, the result can be disastrous. We owe it to New Yorkers to pass this bill.

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