



 **BUY THIS PHOTO** **Reading Eagle: Susan L. Angstadt** | Anabel Adame is one of two interpreters available under a pilot program being run by the Hispanic Center and the Berks County Area Agency on Aging to help Spanish-speaking seniors with their medical appointments.

SUNDAY FEBRUARY 15, 2015 08:01 PM

In Berks County, interpreters are just what doctor ordered

If interpreter is needed

Those who are in need of Spanish/English interpreters for medical appointments can call the Daniel Torres Hispanic Center, 501 Washington St., at 610-376-3748.

WRITTEN BY ANTHONY OROZCO ([/APPS/PBCS.DLL/PERSONALIA?ID=64](#))

For Berks County residents like Juana Colon, going to the doctor involves more than getting to the appointment on time.

It's also about making sure they can understand what the doctor tells them.

"I don't know English," Colon, 66, of Reading said in Spanish. "So it can be very difficult communicating."

Colon and a growing number of other Spanish-speaking seniors like her are relying on a new pilot program that pairs them with an interpreter for their appointments, at no charge.

The service, funded by the Berks County Area Agency on Aging and run from the Daniel Torres Hispanic Center, bridges language and culture gaps found in some medical offices that lack bilingual staff.

Michael Toledo, executive director of the Hispanic Center, said that it's not uncommon for some of the center's older clients to be forced to reschedule appointments if they show up without interpreters.

"Some of our clients, especially our senior clients, come crying to us because they can't keep the appointment," Toledo said. "These are people that have serious conditions, chronic diseases."

Dr. Edward B. Michalik, executive director of the Berks County Area Agency on Aging, said that he saw the need for such a program in the area.

"We are in the rapidly largest-growing area where there is a need for bicultural services," he said. "What we want to provide is bicultural professionals who live and speak the culture, not just translate."

Michalik's office received \$856,000 in additional grant money from the Pennsylvania Department of Aging in October, \$84,000 of which is going toward the Hispanic Center's interpreters.

Toledo said the center is crafting a budget for the interpreters, although he suspects the center will need only about \$50,000 for the in-house interpreting program.

The center has two interpreters to provide the service through the end of June.

The interpreters, Anabel Adame, 24, and Barbara Bonilla, 20, aren't certified medical interpreters in use at hospitals, but they were tested and deemed proficient in the vocabulary needed to properly provide translation in a medical setting, Toledo said.

Michalik said he hopes the county office will be able to fold the new state funds into its future budgets, though it is still undetermined if the office will be able to.

"There are certain benchmarks in the contract," Michalik said. "There will be reports on the number of people who use the service and their experience, if they are satisfied."

Many Spanish-speaking patients in the area rely on family members or insurance-provided interpreters, as Colon has in the past.

Adame said that many times patients have told her about bad past experiences with insurance-provided interpreters and how some are hesitant to seek interpretation services.

She also said some unaccompanied seniors end up not going to some appointments because they are frustrated, discouraged or intimidated.

Personal connection

The Hispanic Center connects its interpreters with clients on a personal level.

"I am usually at the appointment pretty early so the client is not wondering where I am or if I'm going to show up," Adame said. "And there is a whole service element; we meet with them and get to know them and we also remind them of their next appointments."

Colon said that she had found satisfactory service from insurance-provided interpreters, but she liked the working relationship she has with Adame.

Adame said that interpreters may also be able to accompany seniors with only a day's notice, depending on availability.

At times when they are not at appointments with clients, Bonilla and Adame can be found in the Hispanic Center's senior center, Casa De Amistad, and its satellite centers at Glenside Homes, Kennedy Towers and Oakbrook Homes in Reading.

Contact Anthony Orozco: 610-371-5015 or aorozco@readingeagle.com.

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02.16.15 / 12:13 pm

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Their proudest achievement was learning to speak English "like an American" - and having their kids speak it!

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