GUIDE

Working with Bilingual Staff in Aged Care

Introduction

The provision of culturally inclusive care relies on meeting the language and communication needs of all aged care service user/residents. Accurate and appropriate communication is essential to the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of service users/residents and the key to quality care outcomes.

It is not uncommon for aged care providers to employ staff with bilingual or multilingual skills within a variety of roles and professions. These staff members are sometimes called upon to facilitate communication with service users/residents who speak languages other than English, they are in fact called upon as 'Language Assistants'.

Some providers go further and adopt specific recruitment strategies to ensure that they recruit staff who speak the language/s spoken by their service users/residents. Harnessing the language skills of staff can be an invaluable resource in meeting the communication challenges of service users/residents from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

Indeed, recognising and tapping into the valuable language skills of a culturally diverse workforce can be an enormous asset in any aged care setting. These staff can use their skills to help bridge communication barriers with service users/residents who speak a language other than English. However, as with all resources within the workplace, this needs to be carefully managed so as to safeguard the welfare of both staff and service users/residents.

Whilst most aged care providers would readily acknowledge the benefits of employing staff who speak languages other than English, there are few guidelines or policies underpinning the use of these language skills within the workplace, and moreover, little consideration given to the organisational support required to ensure that staff are able to use their language skills to maximum effect.

The purpose of this Guide is to assist managers and care coordinators in the aged care industry to:

- maximize the bilingual skills of their staff to enhance communication and quality of life outcomes for service users/residents who speak languages other than English

- consider the implications of having staff use these language skills within the workplace

- undertake planning and policy development around the institution of a Register of Language Assistants

- institute protocols on the use of Language Assistants across their organisation

The need for policies, protocols and procedures

Best practice dictates that all high quality service delivery requires leadership, strategic visioning, planning, policy development and resource allocation. Instituting an effective program for the use of language skills in the workplace requires consideration at all these levels. Indeed lack of clarity and coordination can lead to confusion in roles and responsibilities among staff and compromise objectivity, privacy, confidentiality, risk management and, ultimately, quality of care.

The role of the Language Assistant

- It is incumbent on every organisation to assess the potential for risk in not using professionally accredited interpreters in any given situation and to decide on the appropriate use of Language Assistants. Due to the privacy, confidentiality, ethical and legal issues involved in dealing with service users/residents, the Language Assistant role **should never be confused with that of a professional interpreter.** For instance, it is more appropriate for professional interpreting services to be accessed for:
    - assessments
    - collecting detailed personal information
    - explaining admission to/provision of a service
    - explaining a service user/resident's rights and responsibilities
    - developing and reviewing care plans/treatments
    - gaining informed consent or where any document requires a service user/residents' signature
    - when a service user/resident wishes to make a formal complaint
- Language Assistants may have a role to play in:
    - providing social support, comfort and alleviating the isolation of an aged service user/resident
    - assisting other staff members to identify/define a situation where a professional interpreter may be needed
    - assisting other staff members to identify/define a situation. For example, where a service user/resident is having trouble expressing that they are in pain or have a need for specific support
    - informing a service user/resident that an accredited interpreter will be provided
    - assisting in clarifying an issue in an emergency situation
    - facilitating informal information sharing
- The Language Assistant can use his or her language skills within two different types of communication encounters:
    - communicating directly with service user/residents in the course of their own professional/occupational role and function
    - facilitating simple communications between a service provider/colleague and a service user/resident. This can occur outside of their professional/ occupational role and function[1].

Developing a Language Assistant Policy

- Consider developing a Language Assistant Policy for the organisation. Such a policy could include:
    - Definitions (e.g. bilingual staff, language assistant, professional interpreter)
    - Role of a Language Assistant
    - Description and purpose of Language Assistant Register
    - Delineate the registration process
    - Protocols on use of a Language Assistant
    - Procedures for working with a Language Assistant
    - Guidelines on situations when professional interpreters should be used instead of Language Assistants
    - Language skills assessment and payment allowances
- Ensure that any policies and procedures you develop are integrated into the broader organisational context and embedded into your continuous improvement processes.
- Ideally policies and procedures in relation to the use of Language Assistants should be part of an overall communications strategy which addresses related multilingual communication issues such as the use of professional interpreter and translation services.
- Ensure that there are sufficient resources to support policy initiatives in this area. Budget allocations might include:
    - language skills assessments
    - further language development for bilingual staff
    - remuneration of staff who are employed on the basis of their second language skills
    - cost of bilingual staff support, coordination and resourcing
    - staff training (both for bilingual staff and for staff in general)
    - access to resources which can support their role

Identifying the diverse language skills within your organisation

- Conducting an audit of your current staff pool can provide a snapshot of the potential language resources available to your organisation. Such a survey would identify:
    - staff who speak one or more language
    - which languages are represented among staff
    - the position held and location of your bilingual staff
    - whether the types of community languages spoken correspond to those of your service users/residents

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Developing a Language Assistant Register

- Consider developing and maintaining a Language Assistant Register for the organisation. This can be done by inviting staff to lodge an expression of interest to volunteer to enlist as a Language Assistant. In developing such a Register it is important to ensure that staff are given the opportunity to consent to utilising their language within the workplace, that they agree to work to clearly defined policies and procedures and agree to undertake appropriate training. This also provides an opportunity for staff to opt out of this role.

- Invitations can be extended to all new staff as part of their induction/orientation and on an annual basis for all existing staff. This will ensure that the Register remains up-to-date.

- At all times bilingual/multilingual staff should be given the right to refuse to be used as a Language Assistant or to withdraw from a given situation where they feel a personal conflict or feel they do not possess the necessary language skills for a particular situation/interaction.

- All staff wishing to register as a Language Assistant should undergo training on policies and protocols as well as an assessment in their degree of proficiency in their language other than English.

- Incorporate the Language Assistant role into position descriptions and work-plans.

Identifying the language and communication requirements of your service users/residents

- The language and communication needs of your organisation are driven by the profile of your service users/residents. The most effective way of determining language needs is to assess them on an individual basis. However, sometimes basic identifying questions around language and ethnicity do not always accurately describe actual language efficiency and communication requirements of an individual.

- It is important not to make assumptions about a person's language background because of their ethnicity. For instance a person may have been born in Egypt but is from a Greek ethnic background and speaks Greek.

- Language proficiency can also be complicated by issues of ageing, poor health and the onset of dementia which can lead to people reverting to their first language and/or losing the ability they once might have had to speak English.

- A service user/resident may also have varying degrees of proficiency in a language, for example, they may be able to speak in their language but have less capacity to read and write in that language. Or rather they may have some understanding of a language by way of reading and writing but not be proficient speakers.

- Discussing the language needs and proficiencies of a service user/resident with family members can provide a great deal of insight into their particular circumstances.

- Information can also be gleaned from a service user/resident's health care professionals such as G.P.s etc.

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Employing staff with language other than English skills to meet the specific needs of your service users/residents

- Advertising for language skills through your recruitment process can be an effective way of increasing the multilingual resources in your organisation. Position descriptions and job advertisements can include terminology such as:
  - o 'Persons from language other than English backgrounds are encouraged to apply'
  - o 'The ability to speak a community language is desirable'
  - o 'A second language is desirable'
  - o 'Bilingual applicants are encouraged to apply, but this is not a prerequisite'
  - o 'Persons who speak (community language) are encouraged to apply'[2]
- Tap into networks with ethno-specific organisations, multicultural community groups and media contacts or multicultural agencies such as migrant resource centres to advertise vacant positions.
- Where a person has been employed for their specific language skills, consider appropriate remuneration and maintaining and/or enhancing their language skills through further training.

Monitoring and Supporting Language Assistants

- Consider appointing a person within the organisation who will be responsible for coordinating, overseeing and supporting the bilingual staff who have agreed to be part of a Register of Language Assistants. This person can be a contact person for your Language Assistants and assist with monitoring languages used, level of demand, patterns of use, identifying issues of concern and possible areas for improvement.
- It is important to acknowledge that Language Assistants are often being called away from other duties in order to assist others with their communication needs. Time limits need to be set as to how long it is reasonable for a person to undertake this role so as not to negatively affect their other commitments or put them under undue pressure.

Staff Training and Development

- Staff across the organisation should undertake training on the role of Language Assistants and on policies and protocols around their usage. For example, it is critical that all managers and staff understand the differences in roles between Language Assistants and professional interpreters and the potential risks of using a Language Assistant in an inappropriate context.
- Provide Language Assistants with training on issues related to:
  - o roles and responsibilities, duty of care, confidentiality and objectivity, ethical and legal implications
  - o cross-cultural communication skills
  - o access to and use of resources
- Where possible, provide opportunities for your Language Assistants to be involved in the ongoing or further development of their language skills.

- Ensure that Language Assistants have access to relevant and up-to-date resources which may assist them in their work such as online translated material and Glossary of Aged Care Terms (containing around 1000 terms translated into 19 community languages) available at www.culturaldiversity.com.au.

- Consider offering Language Assistants the opportunity to gain accreditation as a Language Aide through the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI).

Evaluation and continuous improvement

- Monitor usage patterns by having Language Assistants maintain a record of the inquiry, detailing nature of the enquiry, time involved, language spoken etc. This data can assist providers in identifying trends and in setting future priorities for the program.

- Implement a regular (quarterly/half-yearly) meeting of registered staff members to discuss issues arising such as levels of demand, workplace pressures and other concerns.

- Periodically evaluate the use of Language Assistants and review the language other than English requirements of your organisation

- Evaluate and update the training requirements of Language Assistants and broader staff pool

- Update Register of Language Assistants as required.

- Make recommendations to improve policies and protocols.

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Acknowledgements

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1. *Bilingual Staff Research Project Report*, Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health, Carlton, Victoria, 2008 (p.10)
2. *Language Services: Good Practice in the Victorian Health and Community Sector*, Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health, Carlton, Victoria, 2005 (p.26)

Additional Resources

Bilingual Staff Research Project Report, Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health, Carlton, Victoria, 2008
Online @ http://www.ceh.org.au/downloads/Bilingual_staff_research_project.pdf

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communications Strategy, City of Darebin, July 2010
Online @ http://www.darebin.vic.gov.au/Files/CALD_Communications_Strategy__July_2010.pdf

Language Aide Kit, Ethnic Workers in Local Government Network, A Division of the Local Government Community Services Association, October 2001
Online @ http://www.dlg.nsw.gov.au/dlg/dlghome/documents/Information/language%20aide%20kit.pdf

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Online @ http://www.easternhealth.org.au/services/transdocs.aspx

Language Services: Good Practice in the Victorian Health and Community Sector, Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health, Carlton, Victoria, 2005
Online @ http://www.ceh.org.au/downloads/Language_Services_Good_Practice.pdf

Multilingual Communication Best Practice Example, Smiley, D. and Diaz, D. Conference Proceedings, Managing Diversity Conference, City of Darebin, Melbourne 2003
Online@http://www.culturaldiversity.com.au/images/stories/Multilingual_Communication_Best_Practice_example_low_res.pdf

Further Information

For further information, advice or to organise training for Language Assistants and staff training on the use of bilingual staff within your workplace, please contact the Centre for Cultural Diversity in Ageing:

Email: info@culturaldiversity.com.au

Website: www.culturaldiversity.com.au