

Welcome to Collaborating for Healthy Communication.

As the current chairperson of the San Diego Refugee Forum, I would like to thank you for taking the time to attend this conference on language access in health care.

The Refugee Forum is a multi-agency collaborative bringing together service providers, community-based organizations, government agencies and others interfacing with refugees, those fleeing war and persecution and being resettled in San Diego.

It is out of this spirit of collaboration that this conference on language access arose, and I am very happy to see representatives from a wide range of organizations concerned with and interested in health care here today.

Time and again, community-based needs assessments with refugees and other populations with limited English proficiency have shown language to be the No. 1 barrier to quality care. When your doctor doesn't speak your language, and you don't speak your doctor's language, even the most sophisticated diagnostic tool and the most advanced treatment options become ineffective. Services are denied or delayed, medications are mismanaged, and an already traumatized population experiences more stress and emotional hardship. When a refugee woman takes one Tylenol each night to not get pregnant, mistaking it for birth control because she cannot read the label, when a torture survivor with PTSD is denied disability benefits because he could not communicate with the physician carrying out his assessment, when an elderly lady's diabetes goes untreated and her benefits are terminated because she did not understand the forms she was given, or when a five-year old girl has to explain to her grandfather that he has been diagnosed with cancer, because medical staff weren't able to provide interpretation, it is clearly time for us to act.

As a border region and the third largest resettlement site for refugees, San Diego faces unique challenges with a particularly diverse community of linguistically isolated populations. So by bringing together all stakeholders on this issue, from providers to plans to patient advocates, I hope that we can continue on with this spirit of collaboration to, jointly and together, work towards solutions that ensure equal access to quality care for all.

Thank you again for your commitment and for being here today.