

What kinds of assistance must a NC local health department offer to clients with limited English proficiency?

Local health departments have several duties to limited-English-proficient (LEP) clients. Among the most significant are:

- Local health departments must offer oral interpretation services to their LEP clients. In most cases, clients' family members or friends should not be used to interpret. Clients must never be required to provide their own interpreters in order to receive services.
- Important written materials must be translated into other languages that the health department encounters regularly.
- The local health department must notify clients that language assistance is available at no cost to the client.
- Language assistance must be made available *at no cost to the client*.

These duties are derived from Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Local health departments must have language assistance policies that explain how they will meet these duties.

Many local health departments have been working on coming into compliance with Title VI for several years and have taken important steps in the right direction. Still, there is more work to be done. In 2001 and 2002, federal officials from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) conducted a compliance review to determine how well the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and local human services agencies, including health departments, were meeting the Title VI mandate.

In May 2002, DHHS received a preliminary letter of findings concluding that NC's human services agencies were not in compliance with the language assistance requirements. The letter stated that state and local agencies would be required to take specific steps to come into compliance. DHHS subsequently entered into a Voluntary Compliance Agreement with OCR. Among other things, DHHS agreed to develop a state language access policy. DHHS has also developed a model policy for local human services agencies. These documents are available on the internet at <http://www.ncphlaw.unc.edu/legalinfo.htm> (click on the link to "Immigrant Health").