

# UW Health: Medical interpreter shares the importance of language access, sharing heritage

Posted on Thursday, Oct 6, 2022

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MADISON, Wis. – Rodolfo Osuna Leon sees his role as a medical interpreter at UW Health as more than a job, he sees it as helping patients receive the care and comfort they need.

“I’ve always liked helping people and that’s what this is,” he said. “We’re helping patients connect with their doctors and nurses and understand what they need to do to be well.”

For Osuna Leon, the journey to becoming a medical interpreter was not a direct route. In 2002, he moved with his family to the United States from Mexico. He was 14 years old at the time and thought he would be gone for one year to learn English in Madison.

“Twenty years later and we’re still here,” he said.

When he began working, he was limited to the types of jobs he could pursue due to his undocumented status. Then in 2012, the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program began, which allows some individuals who were brought to the country as children to become eligible for a work permit that must be renewed every two years. As a DACA recipient, many more possibilities opened up, Osuna Leon said.

While working for a cell phone company, he met a customer who was a medical interpreter and strongly encouraged him to pursue the career.

“It really interested me because it seemed like a great way to make a

difference in people's lives," he said.

He took classes for about six months before becoming a contract medical interpreter at UW Health. He joined the team as a full-time staff medical interpreter in 2020.

UW Health currently employs nine full-time interpreters. Eight speak Spanish and English. Medical interpreters attend appointments with patients who need them, they can be called to assist patients admitted to the hospital and are also available over the phone for patients who need help with things like follow-up questions or scheduling appointments.

"We often become very connected to our patients and their families when they have multiple appointments or come here for their families' care over the years," he said.

This service is key to health equity, according to Shiva Bidar-Sielaff, chief diversity officer, UW Health.

"Our interpreters are absolute heroes," she said. "They work tirelessly to make sure our patients can connect with the remarkable providers here at UW Health and receive the care they need to thrive in our community."

Osuna Leon loves his work, and he is thrilled to make an impact on the city he loves. Still, the uncertainty that comes with needing to renew his DACA status every two years is stressful.

"It is a very intensive process," he said.

UW Health is proud to employ DACA recipients, according to Bidar-Sielaff.

"We support DACA recipients and meaningful immigration reform that will offer a path to citizenship," she said. "Our diverse workforce enriches our culture and benefits our patients."

Sept. 15 to Oct. 15 is Hispanic Heritage Month, a special time for Osuna Leon and his family, he said.

"We spend a lot of time together, talking about growing up and living in Mexico and cooking Mexican meals," he said.

It is also a time to share traditions and history with his own two sons, he said.

“I think it’s important to share our family’s food, our language and our stories with my children,” he said.

Language access is a fundamental need in healthcare for many, according to Bidar-Sielaff.

“As required by law, we offer the service to patients who need it,” she said. “And our in-person interpreters are all nationally certified medical interpreters to ensure the best care communication experience we can offer.”

To learn more about language access at UW Health or becoming a medical interpreter, visit [uwhealth.org](http://uwhealth.org).

A recorded interview with Osuna Leon is available.