The Center for Family Involvement (CFI) at the Partnership for People with Disabilities works with families to increase their skills as advocates, mentors, and leaders. As part of carrying out its mission, the CFI employs Cultural Liaisons to the African American and Latino communities. The Latino Cultural Liaison provides training and one to one support to culturally and linguistically diverse families, many of whom are limited English proficient. In 2011, the Latino Cultural Liaison provided 1:1 assistance to 82 Latino families. Through these contacts, two issues have been identified that have challenged families in securing needed services and supports for their children: (1) the lack of translated materials available to families, and (2) inconsistent access to qualified language interpreters.

Translators Materials
Through conversations with Latino families, the Cultural Liaison learned that many families do not have sufficient information in their native language to make informed choices about services and supports for their children. Several families shared experiences about being referred to websites for documents and information on disability services; often to find the information only available in English. In particular, the Cultural Liaison discovered families encountered a lack of information about Medicaid Waivers in their native language on state websites and from local disability providers. Many families also reported that their children’s Individual Education Programs (IEPs) and other reports and assessments associated with their IEPs were available in English, not Spanish. For example, a parent who is limited English proficient made an inquiry to the school about services for her child with a developmental disability. She had never been given any of the IEP documents in her native language and did not know what services were being provided or their effectiveness.

Qualified Language Interpreters
The Latino Cultural Liaison also discovered that many families did not have access to qualified language interpreters during meetings as mandated by law. Multiple families reported that school employees or students who spoke Spanish were used as interpreters during IEP meetings and school health clinics. Families relayed that when non-certified language interpreters were provided for meetings or appointments, their skills varied greatly and often what was interpreted was not word for word, but rather a general idea of what was said. Discrepancies in the skills of non-certified language interpreters could result in bias and misinformation. The fact that someone speaks Spanish does not make them qualified or certified to be an interpreter.

The following recommendations are offered to ensure that culturally and linguistically diverse families of children and youth with special health care needs and disabilities have equal access to supports and services. The CFI recommends that local and state agencies and service providers:

- Become familiar with applicable state and federal laws requiring translation and interpretation for individuals with limited English proficiency.
- Identify the culturally and linguistically diverse populations in the agency’s service area who are eligible for services.
- Develop and implement a system to ensure that culturally and linguistically diverse families have equal access to information regarding their children.
- Provide on-going cultural diversity training to staff (including information on obtaining qualified language interpreters).

Resources:
Executive Order 13166, “Improving Access to Services for Persons with Limited English Proficiency.”
www.lep.gov/13166/eo13166.html