National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) in Health and Health Care

The National CLAS Standards are intended to advance health equity, improve quality, and help eliminate health care disparities by establishing a blueprint for health and health care organizations to:

Principal Standard:

1. Provide effective, equitable, understandable, and respectful quality care and services that are responsive to diverse cultural health beliefs and practices, preferred languages, health literacy, and other communication needs.

Governance, Leadership, and Workforce:

2. Advance and sustain organizational governance and leadership that promotes CLAS and health equity through policy, practices, and allocated resources.

3. Recruit, promote, and support a culturally and linguistically diverse governance, leadership, and workforce that are responsive to the population in the service area.

4. Educate and train governance, leadership, and workforce in culturally and linguistically appropriate policies and practices on an ongoing basis.

Communication and Language Assistance:

5. Offer language assistance to individuals who have limited English proficiency and/or other communication needs, at no cost to them, to facilitate timely access to all health care and services.

6. Inform all individuals of the availability of language assistance services clearly and in their preferred language, verbally and in writing.

7. Ensure the competence of individuals providing language assistance, recognizing that the use of untrained individuals and/or minors as interpreters should be avoided.

8. Provide easy-to-understand print and multimedia materials and signage in the languages commonly used by the populations in the service area.

Engagement, Continuous Improvement, and Accountability:

9. Establish culturally and linguistically appropriate goals, policies, and management accountability, and infuse them throughout the organization's planning and operations.

10. Conduct ongoing assessments of the organization's CLAS-related activities and integrate CLAS-related measures into measurement and continuous quality improvement activities.

11. Collect and maintain accurate and reliable demographic data to monitor and evaluate the impact of CLAS on health equity and outcomes and to inform service delivery.

12. Conduct regular assessments of community health assets and needs and use the results to plan and implement services that respond to the cultural and linguistic diversity of populations in the service area.

13. Partner with the community to design, implement, and evaluate policies, practices, and services to ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness.

14. Create conflict and grievance resolution processes that are culturally and linguistically appropriate to identify, prevent, and resolve conflicts or complaints.

15. Communicate the organization's progress in implementing and sustaining CLAS to all stakeholders, constituents, and the general public.

Think Cultural Health
https://www.thinkculturalhealth.hhs.gov/
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U.S. Department of
Health and Human Services
Office of Minority Health

The Case for the National CLAS Standards

Health equity is the attainment of the highest level of health for all people.[1] Currently, individuals across the United States from various cultural backgrounds are unable to attain their highest level of health for several reasons, including the social determinants of health, or those conditions in which individuals are born, grow, live, work, and age,[2] such as socioeconomic status, education level, and the availability of health services.[3]

Though health inequities are directly related to the existence of historical and current discrimination and social injustice, one of the most modifiable factors is the lack of culturally and linguistically appropriate services, broadly defined as care and services that are respectful of and responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of all individuals.

Health inequities result in disparities that directly affect the quality of life for all individuals. Health disparities adversely affect neighborhoods, communities, and the broader society, thus making the issue not only an individual concern but also a public health concern. In the United States, it has been estimated that the combined cost of health disparities and subsequent deaths due to inadequate and/or inequitable care is $1.24 trillion.[4]

Culturally and linguistically appropriate services are increasingly recognized as effective in improving the quality of care and services.[5,6] By providing a structure to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate services, the National CLAS Standards will improve an organization's ability to address health care disparities.

> **Of all the forms of inequality, injustice in health care is the most shocking and inhumane.**
>
> — Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The National CLAS Standards align with the HHS Action Plan to Reduce Racial and Ethnic Health Disparities[7] and the National Stakeholder Strategy for Achieving Health Equity,[8] which aim to promote health equity through providing clear plans and strategies to guide collaborative efforts that address racial and ethnic health disparities across the country.

Similar to these initiatives, the National CLAS Standards are intended to advance health equity, improve quality, and help eliminate health care disparities by providing a blueprint for individuals and health and health care organizations to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate services. Adoption of these Standards will help advance better health and health care in the United States.
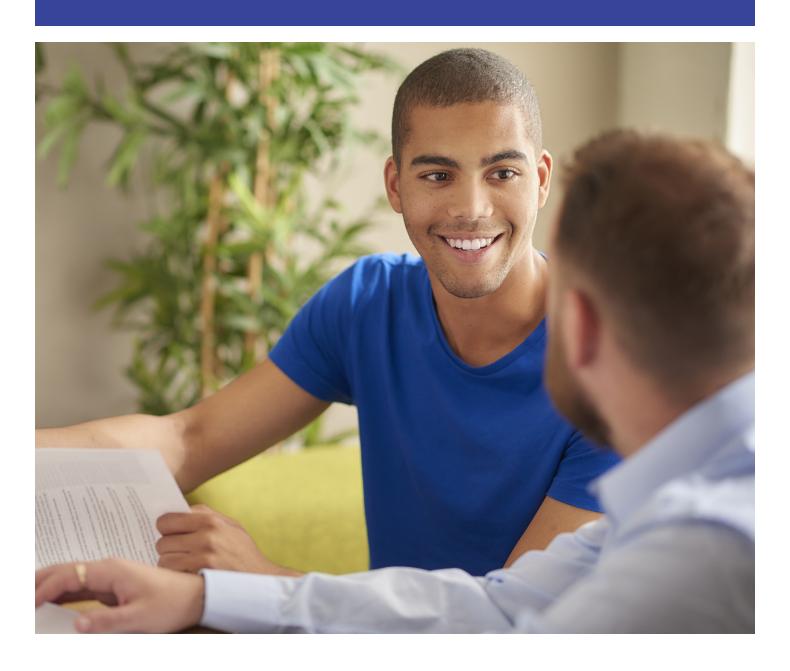
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An Implementation Checklist for the National CLAS Standards

with a CLAS Action Worksheet and CLAS Testimonials

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

OMH — U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health

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Introduction

Culturally and linguistically appropriate services (CLAS) are increasingly recognized as effective in improving quality of care because they help organizations address the cultural and communication barriers that many individuals face when seeking services. In 2015, the Office of Minority Health at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) conducted a study to better understand how organizations use the National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Services in Health and Health Care (the National CLAS Standards).

In this document, you will learn what we learned. The checklist of implementation practices lists successful CLAS-related organizational activities we observed across the organizations we studied. We provide a CLAS action worksheet for you to plan CLAS activities at your office or organization or other type of health care services. At the end of this document, testimonials from those who participated in our 2015 study are included, to give you a snapshot at how and why to implement the National CLAS Standards.

Background

What is CLAS?

CLAS stands for culturally and linguistically appropriate services. CLAS is **services that are respectful of and responsive to each person's culture and communication needs**.

CLAS helps your organization take into account cultural health beliefs, preferred languages, health literacy levels, and communication needs.

What are the National CLAS Standards?

The National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services in Health and Health Care (the National CLAS Standards) gives health organizations **15 action steps for providing CLAS**. The National CLAS Standards and information to help you put them into practice may be found at www.ThinkCulturalHealth.hhs.gov.

The Principal Standard (No. 1) calls on organizations to "provide effective, equitable, understandable and respectful quality care and services that are responsive to diverse cultural health beliefs and practices, preferred languages, health literacy, and other communication needs."

The remaining standards are divided into three themes:

1. Governance, Leadership, and Workforce (Standards 2-4);

2. Communication and Language Assistance (Standards 5-8); and

3. Engagement, Continuous Improvement, and Accountability (Standards 9-15).

The National CLAS Standards can be applied to a wide array of professions and sectors, including medical care, behavioral health, public health, social work, community health, emergency health, and more.

The HHS Office of Minority Health developed the Standards to advance health equity, improve quality of services, and help eliminate disparities. The Standards were first published in 2000 and updated in 2013.

The National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services in Health and Health Care: A Blueprint for Advancing and Sustaining CLAS Policy and Practice, commonly referred to as The Blueprint, provides an in-depth explanation of, and implementation strategies for, each of the National CLAS Standards. There is no single correct way to implement the National CLAS Standards. Your organization may decide to implement some but not all of them, or your organization may wish to implement some sooner than others. After deciding which standards to implement, you can refer to The Blueprint for ideas to get started.

Getting Started

Who is filling this out?

Name

Role or Title

Department or Division

Organization

How to use the implementation checklist

The checklist is divided into practices that relate to each Theme and Standard of the National CLAS Standards. We suggest that you review the checklist and, for each practice, select whether your organization is currently implementing it, planning to implement it, or not planning to implement it at this time.

Each practice is numbered according to the Theme and Standard it corresponds to. For example, 1.2 corresponds to Theme 1, Standard 2. You may find that some practices are not feasible for or relevant to your organization right now, or you may be unsure whether your organization is implementing a certain practice. That's okay. This checklist is simply meant to guide your and your organization's efforts to better provide CLAS.

As you go through the checklist, you may find it helpful to refer to The Blueprint, although it is not necessary to do so to fill out the checklist.

Select your organization's stage of implementation for each practice	Currently implementing	Planning to implement	Not planning to implement at this time
1.2a **Identify and designate a CLAS champion or champions**, who are supported by the organization's leadership, and whose specific responsibilities include (at a minimum) continuous learning about, promoting, and identifying and sharing educational resources about CLAS and the National CLAS Standards throughout the organization.	✓	☐	☐
1.2b **Create and implement a formal CLAS implementation plan** that is (at a minimum) endorsed and supported by the organization's leadership, that describes how each Standard is understood, how each Standard will be implemented and assessed, and who in the organization is responsible for overseeing implementation.	☐	☐	☐

Theme 1: Governance, Leadership, and Workforce

Select your organization's stage of implemention for each practice	Currently implementing	Planning to implement	Not planning to implement at this time
1.2a **Identify and designate a CLAS champion or champions**, who are supported by the organization's leadership, and whose specific responsibilities include (at a minimum) continuous learning about, promoting, and identifying and sharing educational resources about CLAS and the National CLAS Standards throughout the organization.	☐	☐	☐
1.2b **Create and implement a formal CLAS implementation plan** that is (at a minimum) endorsed and supported by the organization's leadership, that describes how each Standard is understood, how each Standard will be implemented and assessed, and who in the organization is responsible for overseeing implementation.	☐	☐	☐
1.3a **Target recruitment efforts to the populations served to increase the recruitment of culturally and linguistically diverse individuals**, through actions such as: posting job descriptions in multiple languages in local community media, holding job fairs in the community(ies) served, and/or working with leaders of local community institutions to create mentorship and training programs targeting populations served.	☐	☐	☐
1.3b **Create internal organizational mentorship programs**, specifically targeting culturally and linguistically diverse individuals, that provide information about and support for additional training opportunities, and that links individuals in junior positions with individuals in senior positions to receive career guidance and advice.	☐	☐	☐
1.4a **Deliver or make freely available continuous CLAS-related training and technical assistance** to leadership and all staff.	☐	☐	☐
1.4b **Create and disseminate new resources about CLAS within the organization using widely accessible platforms** (e.g., employee-dedicated webpages, employee Intranet, employee break room).	☐	☐	☐
1.4c **Incorporate assessment of CLAS competencies** (e.g., bilingual communication, cross-cultural communication, cultural and linguistic knowledge) on an ongoing basis into staff performance ratings.	☐	☐	☐

Checklist of National CLAS Standards Implementation Practices

Theme 2: Communication and Language Assistance

Select your organization's stage of implemention for each practice	Currently implementing	Planning to implement	Not planning to implement at this time
2.5a **Complete an organizational assessment specific to language assistance services** to describe existing language assistance services and to determine how they can be more effective and efficient.	☐	☐	☐
2.5b **Standardize procedures for staff members and train staff in those procedures.** It may be appropriate to provide staff with a script to ensure that they inform individuals of the availability of language assistance and to inquire whether they will need to utilize any of the available services.	☐	☐	☐
2.6 **Provide individuals with notification that describes what communication and language assistance is available, in what languages the assistance is available, and to whom they are available.** Notification should clearly state that communication and language assistance is provided by the organization free of charge to individuals.	☐	☐	☐
2.7a **Require that all individuals serving as interpreters complete certification** or other formal assessments of linguistic and health care terminology skills to demonstrate competency.	☐	☐	☐
2.7b **Provide financial and/or human resource (e.g., time off) incentives to staff who complete interpreter training and meet assessment criteria**, to build organizational capacity to provide competent language assistance.	☐	☐	☐
2.8 **Formalize processes for translating materials into languages other than English and for evaluating the quality of these translations.** This may include testing materials with target audiences.	☐	☐	☐

Your CLAS Action Worksheet

Review the practices you checked as "planning to implement." We suggest choosing three practices that your organization or department will focus on implementing next. Write these three practices down, along with timeframes for their implementation.

How will you help your organization implement these National CLAS Standards? Write down a few concrete action steps. Consider your objectives, challenges, and staff and resources that can support you.

Congratulations! You now have a CLAS implementation action plan!

CLAS Testimonials

The quotes on this page are from leaders at the health organization named, regarding their experience with the National CLAS Standards. We provide them here to help illustrate how implementing the standards may help your organization.

Connecticut Valley Hospital – Department of Mental Health & Addiction Services

Organization Type
Hospital

Location
Middletown, Connecticut

Number of employees
1,600

Website
www.ct.gov/dmhas/

How did you hear about the *National CLAS Standards*?

"In the course of going through the process of formal evaluation and certification of interpreters, and some of the cultural things that we're doing, that's when we discovered the CLAS Standards… I think the fact that it kind of really set a more clearly defined standard was very helpful for us."

What is one way your hospital implements the *National CLAS Standards*?

"We have a system of advocacy. Every area of the hospital has advocacy staff that they can call, where they get their information on patient rights. We talk about language services there, too. They have access to an advocate, so if they don't feel comfortable saying something to their care provider, they can say something to their advocate, and the advocate would come and help them with any aspect of care."

What changes have you seen as a result of implementation?

"We decided to institute competence assessments for the internal bilingual staff. What I've seen is that the more we use appropriate levels of interpreter services and language services for our clients, the quicker they are able to leave the hospital. We've been able to reduce some interpreter costs over time because we've reduced the length of stay of some clients who were requiring so much time. We definitely incorporate families into all of this; we also provide interpreter services for them."

CLAS Testimonials

The quotes on this page are from leaders at the health organization named, regarding their experience with the National CLAS Standards. We provide them here to help illustrate how implementing the standards may help your organization.

New Mexico Department of Health

Why did your organization implement the *National CLAS Standards*?

"This was part of a strategic initiative to help us build trust and respect in the community so that we could address the disparities that we were seeing in our state."

What is the purpose of the *National CLAS Standards* at your organization?

"They are a continuous quality improvement mechanism for our department. It's the process that helps us stay on a track where we're continuously looking at our organization, and to see whether or not we're providing effective service, whether we're providing respectful service, whether we're trying to identify and understand the communities that we serve, those kinds of things. I think to me, it's really about maintaining a continuous quality improvement kind of mentality."

How does your organization implement the *National CLAS Standards*?

"This is supposed to be in all our policies. So whatever we're doing, whatever we're planning, we look at it through a lens of culturally and linguistically appropriate[ness]. As we develop, we're developing with that in mind."

What changes have you seen as a result of implementation?

"It's part of the culture, that we come in and we see signs in multiple languages, that we see clients that speak multiple languages, that we are thinking about making sure that we have staff that can provide services in multiple languages. So to me, it's just been part of our organizational culture."

Organization Type
Public Health Department

Location
Santa Fe, New Mexico

Number of employees
3,000

Website
www.nmhealth.org

CLAS Testimonials

The quotes on this page are from leaders at the health organization named, regarding their experience with the National CLAS Standards. We provide them here to help illustrate how implementing the standards may help your organization.

New York City Health + Hospitals

Organization Type
Public Health Care System

Location
New York City, New York

Number of employees
35,000

Website
www.nychealthandhospitals.org

Why did your organization implement the *National CLAS Standards*?

"Adopting the Standards supports patient-centered care and helps address the barriers (systemic/perceived/actual) that might impede an individual from accessing care, or understanding and acting upon what they need to do to live their healthiest life. The underlying tenet of the Standards recognizes that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to meeting the health needs of diverse communities. The implementation of the Standards demonstrates the value the System places on understanding culture in the delivery of services and on considering the economic, demographic and social determinants of health, individual preferences, and other factors to improve the health of patients and build healthier communities."

How did you get started implementing the *National CLAS Standards*?

"The System has a long history of providing culturally responsive, patient-centered care to a diverse population, but we recognized the need to stay ahead of the curve in responding to the unique cultural, linguistic and health literacy needs of our patients. To achieve this aim, we conducted a needs assessment and underwent a strategic planning process that resulted in a comprehensive roadmap to enhance access and the delivery of equitable care across our System."

How do you implement the *National CLAS Standards*?

"Implementation of the Standards is guided by NYC Health + Hospitals Plan to Enhance Equitable Care, a comprehensive and ongoing approach to improve access and the delivery of equitable care through assessing organizational strengths and opportunities, standardizing policies and practices, developing workforce strategies for capacity building, improving stewardship of data, and expansion of staff and community communication and engagement."

Conclusion

The pursuit of health equity must remain at the forefront of our efforts. CLAS is a way to improve the quality of services provided to all individuals, which will ultimately help reduce health disparities and achieve health equity.

The provision of health services that are respectful of and responsive to the health beliefs, practices, and needs of diverse patients can help close the gap in health outcomes.

Visit https://www.ThinkCulturalHealth.hhs.gov for CLAS resources, including The Blueprint, e-learning programs, a resource library, and much more.

Acknowledgments

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