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*Excerpt from Spanish-language benefits-insurance brokerages aim at workplace safety*

Arrow Benefits Group in Petaluma has identified that need and taken action. In January, Arrow launched a Spanish language division called Alianza, which means “alliance” in English.

Whether it’s learning and practicing on-the-job safety or navigating an array of employee benefits, translation services aren’t the sole solution, said Rosario Avila, who leads Alianza.

“Education is the huge component,” said Avila, who campaigned for ABG to create a Spanish-speaking division after witnessing how well Latino employees responded to bilingual services when she worked for a previous employer. “What we had noticed when we were doing open-enrollment meetings (in Spanish) is that the employees were engaged, asking questions, taking notes.”

After open enrollment was over, however, she observed that the Latino employees would go silent. The Spanish-speaking community hesitates to utilize their health benefits because they don’t know how to effectively use them, Avila said. When they do use them and have questions about a claim, they won’t ask. Instead, they wait until the next year’s open-enrollment period. Oftentimes at that point, a claim has gone to collections and the benefits consultant must work to resolve it, she said. Opening the

communication lines — year-round — is the touchstone of Alianza. Spanish-speaking employees and their families are encouraged to call, text or email questions about their benefits throughout the year, knowing they will receive a direct response from a member of the Alianza team—all who are fluent in Spanish and understand Latin culture.

Among ABG’s approximately 1,400 clients, about 20 percent are anticipated to need Alianza’s educational services, and as many as 60 percent among its food-growing and wine-producing clients in and around Napa Valley, according to the company. To better respond to that need, Alianza recently opened a second office in Napa.

Another advantage to Alianza’s business model of providing year-round bilingual educational services to Spanish-speaking employees is that it can eliminate a potential translation problem, such as turning to a child for help. “It’s typical to rely more on a child because they know English and can translate, even though (the child) doesn’t understand what they’re saying,” Avila said. “Parents need to understand the meaning, not just the word.” Avila noted that, in general, the Latino community will typically go to a walk-in clinic when they don’t feel well, which ends up being more expensive for the employee. As such, employers can end up at a loss when trying to help them.