

# English skills pay off for health care worker, union and patients



Photo by Aaron McElroy

**Jean Bellevue 1199SEIU bargaining committee member and nursing home employee (right) with Herbert Jean-Baptiste 1199SEIU organizer.**

**Jean Bellevue** is a member of his union bargaining committee at a nursing facility just outside of Boston. Elected by the kitchen staff to bring their concerns to the negotiation process, he sits at the bargaining table twice a month, shoulder to shoulder with administrators and union officials, making sure the contract they're hammering out reflects the concerns of his department. This would likely be a challenge for any employee, especially in a workplace that has just gone union, but for Jean there's an extra layer: He's still mastering English.

A native of Haiti, Jean has been in the U.S. 22 years, but until he became a member of 1199 Service Employees International Union (1199SEIU), he had not had the opportunity to study English. Today, his studies are paying off for him, his fellow union members and his family.

"Jean's skills and contributions have improved tremendously with his improvement of English," says Herbert Jean-Baptiste an organizer with 1199SEIU. "He has been involved in negotiation meetings. He comes to English classes regularly. When we have fliers we want to pass out or a message we need to get out into the department, he communicates that with his fellow workers. They trust him because he has been there a long time and has been very respectful."

The Worker Education Program (WEP) is a joint labor-management project of unions and employer partners. Health care workers who are, or will soon be, members are eligible to take English classes at the union hall, offered at convenient times for different work shifts. Members are encouraged to participate in order to improve their English, have a chance to connect with members from other workplaces, and learn more about the union and how it can help them.

### The Worker Education Program

The Worker Education Program (WEP) is a non-profit education program serving members of 1199SEIU United Healthcare Workers East, ASFCME Council 93, and other unions, with the goal of helping entry-level service workers increase their basic skills, access higher paying jobs, and achieve their personal goals. Using a joint labor-management approach, WEP brings union and employer representatives together to collaborate on a student-centered, participatory learning model.

WEP offers ESOL classes on-site at area nursing homes, hospitals, health care centers, and other facilities. WEP's ENB-funded classes are held at the union's training center in Roxbury. They are targeted to 1199SEIU members and Personal Care Assistants in Boston and are scheduled to accommodate workers on both daytime and evening shifts.

- Number of ESOL students at all WEP sites in 2006-07: 100
- Number of MA workers served since 1991: 4,000
- Number of MA employers who have partnered with WEP since 1991: 20+

### Other WEP programs:

- Basic skills classes
- Literacy and language learning
- High school diploma classes
- College preparation classes
- Career ladder programs
- Career counseling

### Contact WEP

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“We always encourage our members to take classes. We want them to be able to speak and communicate with the managers and the people they work with, and to help them improve their lives,” says Herbert. “If they want to improve their lives they will not be able to do it without English skills.”

For students like Jean, the class is an opportunity to improve the English they use at the bargaining table, says Tricia Ridge, WEP Director. “They are trying to reach an agreement about

working conditions and wages. It’s a long struggle but the class has been a way to continue to improve their skills and to strengthen themselves as union members.”

WEP teacher Eunji Gloria Cho Montzouranis develops curriculum that incorporates workplace materials and scenarios. Students discuss benefits and compensation, patient diets, stress on the job, and employee-patient ratios. They review contract language and compare contracts at different job sites.

With work and union vocabulary and content built into the curriculum, asking questions and speaking up more at work becomes easy homework for the students.

Jean is not the only long-time resident who’s just now having the opportunity to study English. In class, he sits next to compatriot Marisante Sylvert, who has been working in health care facilities for 22 years while raising her three children. With the kids grown up and graduated from college, Marisante is ready to focus on her own studies. Ana Valencia came to the U.S. from Columbia 19 years ago and now works as a patient transporter.

Though they’ve worked in health care for many years, English classes are helping Jean and the others on the job.

“The patients speak English so I have to speak English,” says Jean. “The class has helped a lot. I have to

write and we have different menus we have to read. Sometimes I’m working in the dining room, and I need the past history about the patient. We are supposed to ask the patient ‘What you did eat today?’”

For Ana, English has helped her to communicate with the patients she transports around the medical center. It’s also enabled her to communicate better with her supervisor, who first encouraged her to take an English class.

Now, she frequently serves as a translator between her coworkers and the supervisor. English also helps her to be in compliance with company policy: English only in patient rooms.

Their own success and the support they receive from WEP encourages the students to set higher educational goals. Ana plans to complete her high school diploma. Jean plans to study computers.

And, they will all keep participating in their union movement, which, above all, has brought them something they found difficult to attain by themselves: respect as health care workers.

“Before, a CNA was nothing for them, like trash. If you do your best job, they still don’t have respect,” says Marisante. “Now everybody has respect for each other. They sent me a card saying thank you for what you’re doing and that I do a good job. Before they didn’t do that. Now they have respect.”

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**-Tricia Ridge,  
WEP Director**

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**-Jean Bellevue**



Photos by Kensuke Sato

**English for New Bostonians (ENB)** is a public-private-community solution initiated by the Mayor’s Office of New Bostonians committed to expanding the city’s long-term capacity to meet the demand for English classes. ENB increases seats in ESOL programs across the city, supports innovation in the field to reach learners at home and at work, and helps to heighten awareness about immigrant and language issues among the public, businesses, funders and all levels of government.

**Learn more about ENB:**

Mayor’s Office of New Bostonians: 617-635-2980, [cheng.tam@cityofboston.gov](mailto:cheng.tam@cityofboston.gov)

Boston Adult Literacy Fund: 617-482-3336, [balf@balf.net](mailto:balf@balf.net)

Massachusetts Immigrant and Refugee Advocacy Coalition: 617-350-5480 x 203, [cgreen@miracoalition.org](mailto:cgreen@miracoalition.org)

