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Hospital's 'No-Spanish' rule for workers is outrageous

There are nights when Janette Nuñez ducks into utility closets and locker rooms to hand out assignments to some of her Spanish-speaking custodial staff members at Highland Hospital.

The Puerto Rican housekeeping supervisor, who has worked at the hospital since 1999, says she whispers in her office. And when Nuñez meets her Cuban-born husband for lunch in the cafeteria, they head to secluded corners where no one can hear them talking in their native tongue.

"I just don't want to get into trouble," says Nuñez. "It's very frustrating. I've got to be watching who is around me."

You would be, too, if speaking Spanish while on the clock could get you in trouble.

The outrageous policy started with anonymous letters sent in

2003 to hospital administrators. Cindy Becker, the hospital's chief operating officer, says the letters contained complaints from employees who felt isolated and excluded when Spanish was spoken in their presence.

"They didn't know what they were saying," Becker says. "They just assumed they (the Spanish-speakers) were talking about them, but they didn't have any evidence."

What resulted was something called an "action plan" in which the housekeepers, and the housekeepers alone, were instructed to speak in English when in a group. They claim they were reprimanded when they slipped, as when one said goodbye to another in Spanish. (They also claim that at times they were asked to translate for patients in a medical setting.)



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Becker, who says the plan has been misrepresented and misunderstood, says it was about team building and team work.

The U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, though, thinks otherwise. In a suit recently filed in federal court on behalf of Nuñez and four other Spanish-speaking employees, the commission said the "English-only/No-Spanish Rule" is unlawful, is not justified by business necessity and adversely affecting Hispanics.

Well, yeah.

Hospital officials still defend the plan, which remains in effect. "What we do now is in the hands of the attorneys," says Highland's spokesman John Turner.

But on Thursday officials did meet with members of the Spanish Action Coalition, a Hispanic advocacy group. Turner says the group has offered to advise the hospital on its interactions with Hispanic patients, employees and the community. That could start within weeks.

"What we're focused on today is what can we do to be more culturally sensitive moving forward," he says.

That's a good start. Here's another thought: In most workplaces, speaking a second language is a good thing. I'll go out on a limb here and suggest it's welcomed even at Highland.

With a growing Latino community, it just makes business sense to have Spanish speakers in the workplace.

But it's wrong to dictate how they interact among themselves just to make others feel better.

"People used to feel uncomfortable working with women, working with blacks, working with Puerto Ricans," says Julio Vazquez, head of Ibero-American Action League Inc., who's also on the board of directors for the University of Rochester Medical Center, which runs Highland.

It's rude to speak another language among those who don't share it, says Vazquez, but "making people feel uncomfortable is not illegal."

For Nuñez, there's more to it. "This is about respect," she says. "This is about principle. ... This is about dignity. □"