Improving Health Literacy: Ways Adult Literacy and Public Health Can Partner Together to Make a Difference

Wisconsin Health Literacy Summit
April 2011

Jennifer Dillaha, MD
Special Advisor, Strategic Initiatives
Arkansas Department of Health
Health literacy is a stronger predictor of health status than age, income, employment status, education level, or racial and ethnic group.

Alliances between Literacy Councils and Public Health agencies are mutually beneficial.

- Public Health has specialized health knowledge, program development and data analysis expertise.
- Literacy Councils have expertise in teaching the very people that Public Health wants to engage.
Partnership Can Advance Health and Literacy Goals by

- Promoting the link between health and literacy
- Providing resources and training on health topics for adult learners and professional development for public health providers
- Linking students with health services and patients with adult education
- Identifying and applying for funding for combined literacy-health initiatives for which one or the other organization is not eligible to apply
Scope of Health Literacy

- Health-related activities are a part of the daily life of adults, whether sick or well.
- Many health-related decisions are made in the workplace and in the marketplace.
- The presentation of health information is often unnecessarily complex.
- Current evidence reveals a mismatch between people’s skills and the demands of health systems.
A Hidden Problem

• Low health literacy is often undetected
• People may have trouble understanding both printed materials and the meaning of discussions with providers
• People who are confused about health information may feel ashamed
• They may mask their shame to maintain their dignity
The Public Health System Is Often Unaware that It Has a Health Literacy Problem.
Public Health Systems

• Demands for reading, writing, and numeracy skills are intensified due to systems’ complexities, advancements in discoveries, and new technologies.

• These demands exceed the health literacy skills of most adults in the US.

• Health literacy is fundamental to quality care that health departments want to offer.
What Do Literacy Councils Have to Offer?

• Expertise in Low Literacy
  • Review of Materials
  • Evaluation of Process
  • Professional Development

• Community Linkages
  • Stakeholder Representation
  • Orientation to Adult Education
How Health Departments Work: The Federal Level

- US Dept of Health and Human Services (HHS) provides leadership for public health activities at the national level

- Responsible for federal public health programs that are implemented at state and local levels with
  - Funding
  - Capacity-building
  - Core public health functions
How Health Departments Work: The State Level

- No two states are alike
- Most state HDs are independent agencies
- About 20 states HDs are in a “super agency”
- Health-related programs may be located in agencies other than the state PH department
- The state public health authority has primary responsibility for public health issues
- Funded by federal government, state budget through appropriations by state legislature, and private sources
How Health Departments Work: The Local Level

- The “front line” of public health
- The place where state and local health policies and programs intersect with the health needs of community members
- Local Health Departments very greatly
- May have local Board of Health
- Large range of jurisdiction sizes: county, city
- Focus on service delivery
- Funding local, state, or federal
Where Do You Start?

- Define the Problem Well
- Identify the Public Health Stakeholder
  - Search Agency Website
  - Follow the Funding Stream
  - State Public Health Association
  - Chronic Disease Program
  - National Public Health Information Coalition
Stanford Chronic Disease Self-management Program

- 2 ½ hours, once a week, for six weeks, in community settings
- People with different chronic health problems attend together
- Facilitated by two trained leaders, one or both are non-health professionals with a chronic diseases themselves
Stanford Chronic Disease Self-management Program

• How to deal with problems, such as frustration, fatigue, pain and isolation
• Exercise for strength, flexibility, and endurance
• Nutrition
• Use of medications
• Communicating effectively with family, friends, and health professionals
• How to evaluate new treatments
Stanford Chronic Disease Self-management Program

• Companion book, *Living a Healthy Life with Chronic Conditions*, and an audio relaxation tape, *Time for Healing*.

• Mutual support and success build the participants’ confidence in their ability to manage their health and maintain active and fulfilling lives.
Hometown Health

• Strengthening Community Engagement
  • Increase the value of public health
  • Develop local capacity for health education services
  • Promote inclusion of disparate populations in community development
  • Enhance school-based wellness initiatives
  • Strengthen local emergency response
Hometown Health Improvement Branch

Assists communities in improving the health of citizens by promoting healthy behaviors and providing assistance with the development of health services and systems of care.
Hometown Health Support Services

• Help communities improve the health of their hometowns through:
  • Coalition building
  • Community health assessment
  • Development & implementation of community health strategies through local initiatives
Health literacy is a stronger predictor of health status than age, income, employment status, education level, or racial and ethnic group.

Contact Information

Jennifer Dillaha, MD
Arkansas Department of Health
4815 West Markham Street, Slot 39
Little Rock, AR 72205

Office: 501-661-2864
Email: Jennifer.Dillaha@Arkansas.gov