

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

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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 vary 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

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