Developing Health Literacy through Health Information and Services

OCLC
WebJunction®

ZEROD/V/DE™

INSTITUTE of
Museumand**Library**
SERVICES

**Health Happens
In Libraries**

Developing Health Literacy through Health Information and Services

Overview
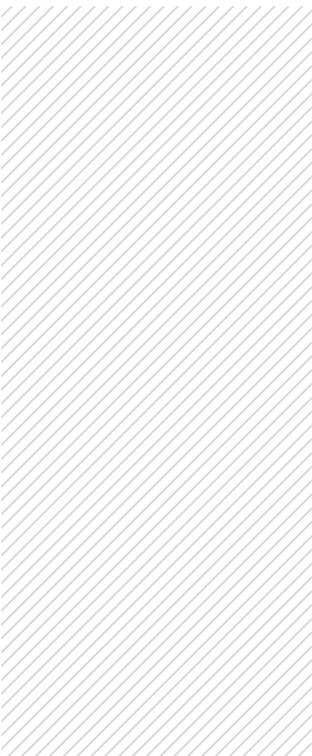
What is health literacy?

According to information provided by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010, Title V, defines **health literacy** as the degree to which an individual has the capacity to obtain, communicate, process, and understand basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions.

Why does health literacy matter to the community?

Literacy needs related to health you may recognize in your community include:

- Adult community members who need assistance building healthcare budgets or understanding insurance terminology

- Timekeeping challenges evidenced by difficulty in keeping appointments, coordinating transit schedules and transportation needs, and/or balancing different areas of personal life

- Uncertainty about the importance and process of taking medications according to prescribed methods and doses

- Finding secure sources of developmental support for infants and preschool age children

- Lack of awareness that not all information found online is of equal authority, indicating a literacy shortfall in information evaluation skills

Why does health literacy matter to the library?

Several types of literacy—including financial, culturally competent timekeeping, the capacity to follow written and oral directions, and accurate information evaluation—play important roles in the health and wellness of individuals, families and neighborhoods in your community. Information provided by the National Networks of Library of Medicine notes that multiple literacies promote active health literacy, including visual literacy, computer literacy, information literacy and numeric/computational literacy. Public libraries are in a strong position to advance these through providing reliable and timely information on health topics.

What areas of guidance are available in this pathway?

Along this pathway, you can explore three common areas of health literacy, as well as related resources and actions that may be useful in your library service to your community. These areas include:

- Understanding Plain Language Access to Health Information

- Finding and Sharing Free Health Literacy Support Tools

- Bringing Health Literacy Training to Your Community

Understanding Plain Language Access to Health Information

Public Library Scenario

Shelby was reflecting on an interesting information challenge. She found that much of the health information in the library's reference books was highly technical. And when members of the community, many of whom had English as a second language, some of whom hadn't had more than a few years of very elementary education elsewhere—wanted to know about their prescriptions, or how to keep a child with celiac disease healthy, Shelby wondered where to even begin.

"Why does all this medical stuff have to be so hard to read?" she considered aloud to a friend. "I mean, I understand that it is complicated. I just wish there was a way to talk about it with the right information and easy to understand language."

Key Concept

Plain language is a 15-year-old government initiative. In fact, at the federal level, <u>plain language</u> is the law, and significant resources exist to bring plain language to communities through healthcare providers, information specialists and other community service providers.

Resources and Actions to Help You Advance Health Literacy

The Plain Language Guidelines are the place to start when thinking about the information available to your community, the way the information is expressed and can be expressed, and how to develop community health literacy. The guidelines are based on these three goals of presenting written information, though they can be broadly applied to verbal and visual communication as well:

Write so that users can

- Find what they need

- Understand what they find

- Use what they find to meet their needs

Plain Language: Improving Health Literacy is a free website maintained by the federal government. It has original text written to explain health literacy concepts and the basic considerations someone with a health-related question needs to explore. It also offers an annotated list of external links to health literacy support for service providers, including library staff. Some of these external links are also government resources, while others are from private sector agencies.

Healthfinder.gov Content Syndication allows you to add authoritative, easy-to-read health content to your library's online resources, via your Web page. The National Health Information Center creates and maintains the Healthfinder.gov site to provide members of the public with plain language information about health, medical conditions, and prescription and nonprescription medicines. Adding this site to the resources you provide to the community requires little technical skill on your part. It assures that you are making available authoritative information that is easy to find and to read.

Applying Plain Language to Your Collection

- Evaluate your health and medical print collection, keeping the three goals of plain language in mind. Do the materials on hand fit the needs of your community? Can community members understand the material? Can they use the information within the material to answer the needs they have for topical information?

- Remove outdated health material and health material that does not serve the literacy needs of your community. If possible, locate and acquire plain language print texts.

- Replace your "go to" resources from texts written for professional medical audiences with authoritative plain language publications on the healthcare topics to direct and assist community members. These tend to be online and they are free.

Identify Solutions

Reflecting on Shelby's situation in the public library scenario, take a few moments to consider and document recommendations on the following:

How might a patron benefit from health information provided in plain language?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What are some questions you might ask to gauge patron understanding when discussing or sharing resources on health topics that might involve complex terminology?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Finding and Sharing Free Health Literacy Support Tools

- *Gain awareness of free tools available to support health literacy*

Public Library Scenario

Jordan knew that the library budget was never going to stretch to include the support the neighborhood needed to use the medical books in the library's collection. Even when a community member seemed to enjoy reading from the fiction collection, that person looked confused when Jordan offered books as guides in response to practical questions like learning to use a home blood pressure reader. He knew for himself that sometimes he couldn't make sense of the written descriptions of processes in various handbooks. Could there be alternative places to look for important health and healthcare information, beyond textbooks?

Key Concept

Reading is not always the best way for any of us, no matter the level of our literacy skills, to learn the answers to topics related to health. Even if your library keeps a print collection for community members to use when exploring health topics, other information formats are important to supply as well.

Resources and Actions to Help You Advance Health Literacy

Different formats support health literacy in unique ways.

Videos

- Show relationships and procedures more clearly than narrative text can

- Are available with closed captioning and with captions in multiple languages

MedlinePlus Videos and Cool Tools is a free resource of authoritative videos from the US National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. The collection of Anatomy Videos allow you to see clearly how different body systems are arranged, how they work and what happens when various disorders, diseases and conditions are present. Surgery Videos give clear visual information about a large number of procedures. Each of these sets of videos is arranged by anatomical system and, when relevant, by age (such as surgeries undertaken on children).

Local Agency Pamphlets and Brochures

- Bring attention to specific local services available

- Address medical concerns professionals in the field recognize as important to the local community

Locating appropriate pamphlets and brochures on health matters affecting your community may take phone calls or even visiting patient education resources in the community. Consider these possibilities:

- Red Cross blood donation stations

- Patient education libraries in local hospitals

- Family Support Services client office

- Free and low cost public health clinics

- Planned Parenthood

If you make other agencies' publications available to library users, take responsibility for checking on the datedness of the brochures you have collected. Talk with the agencies about notifying you when revised issues become available.

Authoritative Databases

- Provide appropriately updated information

- Allow users to travel from one piece of information to another by hyperlink

MedlinePlus is an authoritative and free health database to provide your community. This is a large database and it is essential to understand what you, as the library staffer helping a community member, can find there. Because of its scope and depth, your community is likely to need only very specific parts of it. Don't overwhelm a community member by directing her to this database as a whole! You should help anyone needing assistance navigating to the point in it that allows them to find what they need, understand what they need and use what they find to meet their needs. A great place to begin to familiarize yourself with this database is the Site Map.
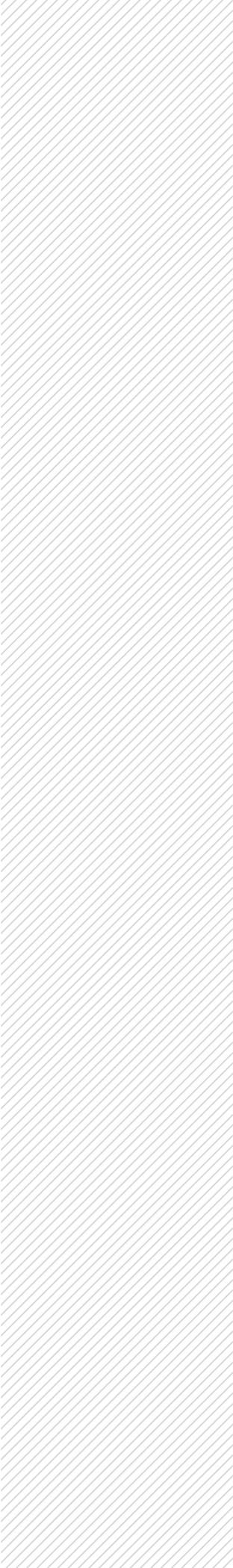
To ensure that community members who want to search independently for health information have ready access to easy-to-read material, provide direct access to Healthfinder.gov. This database provides information on:

- Health topics, arranged A–Z, with clear directions to alternative terms under which any topic may be filed

- Medicines, including explanations of how to use prescription medicines properly and safely

- Doctor visit support that addresses how to talk with the physician, medical tests, vaccines and regular checkups

- Parenting guidance, including developmental milestones, safety and communication help

- Services finding aids to help community members find local health specialty services including those addressing mental health needs, nursing facilities and even your public library

Identify Solutions

Reflecting on Jordan's situation in the public library scenario, take a few moments to consider and document recommendations on the following:

What are two or three organizations in your community that you reach out to for relevant collateral (i.e., pamphlets or brochures) for sharing in your library on local health resources?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

What specific areas of MedlinePlus or Healthfinder.gov do you anticipate patrons in your community might be most interested in, and why?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Bringing Health Literacy Training to Your Community

Public Library Scenario

Jean wondered how to set aside time to create a public workshop to address frequently asked questions from community members about identifying insurance coverage for healthcare. Just remembering some of the questions people had asked during the first open enrollment period of the Health Insurance Marketplace, about what numbers they really needed to put where when figuring out how much different plans cost, was a little overwhelming.

"These are really important issues and people keep asking questions," she sighed. "I need to find a way to get some training about these things out to the community."

Key Concept

*Regardless of community members' literacy skills and comfort levels, supporting community health literacy should be an ongoing library commitment. Your library can advance community **access** to health information, support patrons in **processing** that information, and provide guidance or referral support that allows them to **understand** the information.*

Providing patron training is an excellent way to reach many patrons at once with consistent and up-to-date information. Training can take many forms, such as point of reference or one-to-one support, single informational sessions open to the community, workshops for registered participants, and even multi-week engagements with a specific cohort of learners. The Competency Index for the Library Field, available at WebJunction.org, articulates specific activities to develop patron training as part of public library service, and notes on page 51 that:
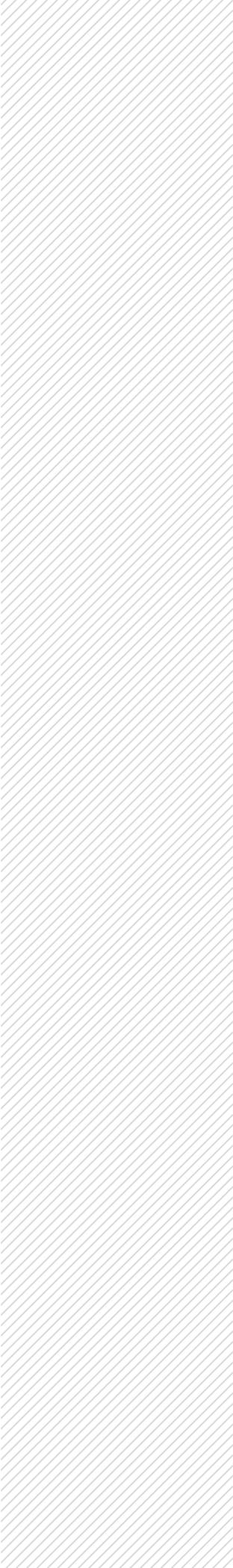
Depending on the size of library, there may be management positions or whole departments responsible for fostering patron learning. In some libraries, volunteers may be leading patron training. No matter where the responsibility resides, patron training and the advancement of 21st century literacy skills are crucial ways in which the library serves its community.

Some of the essential priorities to consider throughout your health literacy training efforts, as specified by the Competency Index for the Library Field, include the following, and can guide your application of available resources:

- Define desired outcomes for patron training programs and build a curriculum to meet those outcomes

- Identify and manage trainers (staff, external, volunteers) and training materials (use external, create new, repurpose existing); manage scheduling of classes

- Establish a plan for marketing and promotion of patron training, including outreach and community-based efforts

- Evaluate training programs, using appropriate evaluation strategies (post-class evaluation forms, debrief with trainers, etc.) and use results to improve future training content and delivery

- Foster a positive learning atmosphere—one that respects and values diversity

Resources and Actions to Help You Advance Health Literacy

Like other types of literacy, health literacy's necessary attributes aren't limited to decoding words or even working through sentences. Instead, the health literate person, in the US, must be able to undertake a variety complex tasks related to their personal care or the care of others, such as:

- Comprehending spoken instructions from healthcare providers with multiple steps

- Understanding and responding to written requests for personal health information, and interpreting written instructions from providers

- Measuring medications and managing the timing of dosages

- Assessing and managing costs for services

While the scope of health literacy training that you provide your community will be based on local needs and your library's capacity, the following resources can help inform content considerations for that training.

MedlinePlus Easy-to-Read pages include guidance to help you write for the Web or other resources in plain language. These pages also offer interactive tutorials that you can feature and highlight for community members for whom reading text may be difficult or time-consuming. Many of the documents on these pages are available in both English and Spanish.

Evaluating Health Information resources, also from MedlinePlus steps you through the process of learning—and modeling—healthy online information evaluation. The related tutorial may be a great resource for patron or even staff training on this important topic. Remember, you can't help your community improve their information evaluation skills unless you make sure that your own are healthy!

That National Network of Libraries of Medicine provides many training and educational opportunities for information organizations, and has made available resources regarding Promoting Health Literacy through Easy to Read Materials.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention also maintains an overview of how to develop materials to promote health literacy, as well as resources to consider in promoting education and community support for health literacy. Explore and share theses resources with colleagues, patrons, and partners to build shared understanding and prioritization around this important topic.

In addition to developing patron education opportunities, engaging community partners is an excellent way to bring meaningful health literacy support to your community, through training or outreach. Community health partners can benefit from library assets such as meeting space, public access technology, and accessible hours to connect with community members, potentially using materials that they have already customized to community audiences, while bringing positive attention to the resources at your library.

Identify Solutions

Reflecting on Jean's situation in the public library scenario, take a few moments to consider and document recommendations on the following:

What are some patron learning outcomes that you would like to support regarding health literacy in your community?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Does your staff have the interest in building or have existing skills to offer health literacy training? If not, consider which potential local partners you could collaborate with to meet local needs.

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Think about a training you enjoyed attending or providing, on any topic. What about that training made it successful? How could you bring those factors to a health literacy training in your library?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____