Institute *for* Healthcare Advancement

Advancing Health Literacy Toward Health Equity

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Health Literacy Champions: How Nebraska's Health Departments Are Closing the Equity Gap

Introduction

Health equity, the ability of all people to attain the highest level of health, lies at the core of the essential public health services. Utilizing health literacy best practices that increase patient understanding of and ability to use health information advances health equity.

A vision for improving communication, public engagement, and organizational practices led the Nebraska Association of Local Health Directors (NALHD) to make the Institute for Healthcare Advancement's (IHA) Health Literacy Specialist Certificate Program (HLSCP) accessible to Nebraska's health departments. This initiative aims to enhance organizational health literacy, improve communication, and ensure organizational sustainability through policy and continuous training. It has empowered local health department leadership and staff with a wider lens to recognize and address health disparities and create stronger connections with increasingly diverse communities throughout the state.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024). 10 Essential Public Health Services. www.cdc.gov/public-health-gateway/php/about/

Background

Local Nebraska health departments serve large geographic areas with diverse populations, including individuals in rural areas who face barriers to accessing healthcare, provider shortages, and hospital closures. Additionally, a growing number of the state's residents — about 7.1 percent — are people with immigrant backgrounds, presenting a critical need for culturally and linguistically appropriate health services and information.

The COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted these inequities in impact, care delivery, and health literacy as many vulnerable populations struggled to find testing. Often complex public health messages about the virus and critical health directives were only disseminated in English.[1]

It was against this backdrop that the Nebraska Association of Local Health Directors secured a significant grant from the United States Health and Human Services Office of Minority Health (OMH), which has a mission to improve the health of racial and ethnic minority populations through the development of health policies and programs that will help eliminate health disparities. [2]

The NALHD has been involved in the annual Health Literacy Month each October and encourages ongoing quality improvement by engaging members in their Health Literacy Champion Process, which assists organizations in assessing and improving their health literacy practices. But the OMH grant allowed the organization to expand training opportunities beyond the primary interest areas, benefiting health departments statewide.

"We knew we had to sustain this work, and creating health literacy champions in each community became our strategy," said Susan Bockrath, MPH, CHES, Executive Director of NALHD.

The Health Literacy Champion process trained 100 individuals from 18 health departments and the Winnebago tribal health department across 93 Nebraska counties.

[1] https://www.cdc.gov/pcd/issues/2020/20_0256.htm

[2] https://minorityhealth.hhs.gov/about-office-minority-health

The Health Literacy Champion process offered access to the Institute for Healthcare Advancement's Health Literacy Specialist Certification Program (HLSCP), designed to enhance the ability of public health organizations to communicate more effectively with diverse populations.

The certification includes micro-credentials in communication, community engagement, education, ethics, language, culture, and diversity, organizational systems and policies, and public health. Courses emphasize health literacy strategies such as plain language communication and Teach Back, a way of checking patient's understanding by asking them to state in their own words what they need to know or do about their health. It also allows participants to gain confidence in becoming health literacy subject matter experts and enhance credibility.

NALHD created learning cohorts and conducted monthly Zoom workshops so participants could connect with one another. They supported non-native English speakers with additional resources such as notes and resources to assist participants with exam preparation and other differences in language and alphabet. Finally, they utilized testimonial interviews to support participants in integrating health literacy into their daily work experiences.

"We heard over and over again how important it was for participants to be able to talk to each other about how they were using health literacy strategies in their work," says Allison Starr, Project Associate — Health Literacy & Language Access at NALHD.

Starr and other NALHD staff completed the certificate program, which is now used during onboarding of new employees. “Health literacy is a lens I use in my personal and professional life,” Starr says. “It helps me remember when I go to the doctor or encounter health information and struggle to understand it that I’m not the only one who finds it confusing and inspires me to want to communicate more clearly.”

Widening the Lens to Find and Close Health Equity Gaps

The Health Literacy Specialist Certificate Program has been pivotal in NALHD’s efforts to help its member health departments address Nebraska’s health disparities.

Health literacy strategies go beyond clear communication — they ensure marginalized populations can access, understand, and utilize care, services, and information. Equipping public health workers with the knowledge to integrate plain language, cultural competency, and effective patient strategies, the HLSCP has helped public health workers find new avenues for reaching underserved communities.

Maria Elena Villasante attends many conferences and workshops to continue her health literacy and professional education, but says HLCSP is set apart because “it gives you content, but also the tools to implement the knowledge you’ve learned.”

Every patient encounter can benefit from health literacy best practices. “Clinical providers often spend the shortest amount of time with a patient, which is why organizational buy-in makes healthcare more effective,” Bockrath says.

IHA’s certificate program touches on each part of the patient journey. It includes micro-credentials in communication, community engagement, education, ethics, language, cultural competency and diversity, organizational systems and policies, and public health. Courses emphasize health literacy strategies such as plain language communication, allow participants to gain confidence in becoming health literacy subject matter experts, and enhance credibility. It offers actionable steps to improve both individual and organizational health literacy.

Villasante, a clinical psychologist, has since advocated for increased participation in the program and community of practice and served as a champion for health literacy inside and outside the health department.

“The Health Literacy Specialist Certification Program is the best training I’ve ever received.”
— Maria Elena Villasante, Health Equity Initiatives Coordinator at the Lincoln-Lancaster County Health Department.

The module on plain language and adapting materials to specific communities was valuable, as were the learning strategies to improve culturally competent communication and tailoring approaches to fit the needs of communities like the Afghan and Sudanese populations.

“The curriculum does very well in giving you lenses to consider the possibility of what you might be missing when it comes doing outreach and addressing health disparities,” she adds.

She also has seen a positive impact of the health equity training in organizational policies and systems and the positive impact of the training on her department’s Equity Committee members. “We are beginning to review every policy that the health department has for health equity as that’s a goal of our leadership team,” Villasante says.

Meghan Trevino, Assistant Executive Director of the West Central District Health Department and participant in the second cohort of the HLSCP, agrees that HLSCP teachings have been

transformative, improving both internal communication and community outreach emphasizing the importance of clear, accessible communication to reduce misunderstandings and improve community trust.

Trevino also praised the community of practice facilitated by the NALHD. “There were several of us across the state of Nebraska going through the training at the same time, and each month, NALHD would have a focused conversation over Zoom where we could all come together, ask questions, and talk about what we’re learning how others were putting it into their work.”

Initially, only two of the West Central District’s team members completed the HLSCP, but after seeing the impacts on staff member’s work and reviewing metrics for effectiveness that included patient satisfaction surveys and feedback on how community members heard about their services, eight additional members of the small team of 15 completed the training.

“When creating new content, we now consider how to put material out following best practices,” Trevino noted. This mindset shift has permeated their team culture and everyday operations, with staff even discussing in Slack channels how to make their communications clearer and more accessible.

“We ask each other, ‘Is there a more health-literate word we could use?’ or ‘Can we adjust the messaging to make it clearer?’”

Sharing Knowledge to Increase Impact

Both Trevino and Villasante have carried the lessons learned from the HLSTP beyond their respective health departments.

Trevino has been invited by a local group called Families 1st Partnership to facilitate conversations and present health literacy trainings for community members and local partners. “We dedicated a time at the beginning of monthly meetings to focus on health literacy and have been invited back to do more,” she says.

Villasante says the training helped her become a better advisor to the six cultural centers of Lincoln she serves and individuals she collaborates with, such as health workers and peer support specialists who address mental health and chronic disease prevention. “I implemented the plain language and teach-back methods within my teams, and it was amazing to see the difference it made in how we engage with communities,” she says.

The true power of the partnership between NALHD and IHA may lie in its ability to generate ripple effects across communities. By sharing what they’ve learned, participants in the Health Literacy Champion program who have completed the Health Literacy Specialist Certificate Program have extended the impact of health literacy beyond their departments, leading community health literacy efforts. Whether training health workers on effective communication strategies or advising peer support specialists on health literate and culturally competent chronic disease management, their work demonstrates how improving organizational health literacy can transform entire care networks.

Left to right: Shannon Vanderheiden, Executive Director; Sara Ningen, Director of Community Health; Meghan Trevino, Assistant Executive Director/Incoming Executive Director; Jill Falcon, Assistant Financial Officer; Trudy Merritt, Outreach Coordinator; Maria Lein, Certified Medical Interpreter/ Community Health Worker; Jennifer Marchlewski, Emergency Response Coordinator; Betsy Jurgensen, RN/ Community Health Manager.