

Addressing Health Literacy Needs in Southeastern Pennsylvania and Beyond

Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the ability to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. Individual characteristics (age, education, experience with the healthcare setting, culture, etc.) and system factors (noise level, time, complexity of information, etc.) interact to influence a patient's health literacy during any given healthcare encounter. Patients demonstrating low health literacy are at risk for excessive hospitalizations, increased healthcare costs, poor health status, and other undesirable health outcomes.¹

Several recent federal policy initiatives, including the Affordable Care Act, the Plain Writing Act, and the [National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy](#), address health literacy in the context of the entire health care system.² Within public health, health literacy has been linked to several key frameworks, including [Healthy People 2020](#), and the [Ten Essential Public Health Services](#).³ Health literacy is no longer viewed solely as a patient deficit or responsibility, but as an integral component in moving towards a healthcare system that promotes population health.

Recognizing the need for a comprehensive regional approach to addressing health literacy, Thomas Jefferson University and Hospitals (TJUH) and the [Health Care Improvement Foundation \(HCIF\)](#) developed SEPA-READS, an ongoing partnership supported by funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Health since 2010. SEPA-READS seeks to improve provider communication, facilitate organizational change, and increase patient empowerment and self-efficacy. The initiative engages health systems and

community organizations to affect change on both sides (provider and patient) of the healthcare encounter.

In five years, faculty from Thomas Jefferson University have educated more than 300 staff members from nine health systems (including TJUH) to become health literacy champions and trainers at their respective organizations. The comprehensive curriculum includes verbal and written communication techniques, materials design and assessment, web design, and wayfinding/navigation. The effectiveness of the trainings is assessed using pre/post-tests and evaluations. All evaluation respondents (n=90) who attended training in 2015 indicated that they intended to change practice as a result of attending. When asked what types of practice would change, participants most commonly identified using teach back (61.2%), a verbal communication technique used to confirm patient understanding by asking the patient to explain instructions in his or her own words⁴, and modifying patient education materials (68.9%). Pre and post-tests indicate a moderate increase in knowledge: before the training, respondents averaged 60% correct; after the training, the average increased to 70%. SEPA-READS provider partners have reported educating over 7,000 staff members on health literacy and effective patient-provider communication techniques as a result of the train-the-trainer sessions.

The trainings also build capacity to advocate for and implement system-level changes to improve health literacy at their respective health systems. Provider partners have reported the implementation of at least 30 health literacy interventions. Examples of these interventions include

revising education materials and teaching techniques for congestive heart failure patients, updating hospital signage to improve patient and visitor navigation, implementing policies regarding the suitability and reading level of materials, and addressing the literacy and language needs of non-native English speakers.

SEPA-READS supports patient activation by recruiting and training peer educators from ten partner community organizations. The community curriculum revolves around the National Patient Safety Foundation's [Ask Me 3®](#), an education program that encourages patients to ask questions to better understand their care. To date, over 100 peer educators have educated more than 700 patients to play an active role in their health care. Peer educators are highly praised in session evaluations, and attendees indicate intention to use Ask Me 3® during their next healthcare encounter. They also demonstrate a high level of engagement in their own care, and the passion and ability to support others in becoming empowered patients.

While trainings and interventions during the initial five-year funding period targeted cardiovascular health in older adults, the scope of SEPA-READS has now shifted towards a broader focus on chronic disease management and population health. Health literacy activities will continue through 2018, supported by additional funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Health. In addition to maintaining regional efforts in Southeastern Pennsylvania, HCIF and Thomas Jefferson University and Hospitals are leading the development of a statewide health literacy coalition. Partnering with other regional health literacy initiatives, such as the [Regional Health Literacy Coalition](#)

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in Pittsburgh, provides a strong foundation from which to build statewide collaboration.

Addressing health literacy, a key component of improving population health, will continue to require coordinated efforts at the provider, patient, and system levels. Leveraging existing health literacy activities in Southeastern Pennsylvania, supporting nascent health literacy initiatives, and strengthening relationships among health literacy stakeholders are crucial steps to improving the health of all Pennsylvanians by creating a culture of health literacy in the Commonwealth.

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