

Cultivating Health Literacy at the State and National Levels

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In 2004 the Institute of Medicine (IOM) released a landmark report on the state of health literacy in the United States. That report, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion*, pulled together a growing body of information indicating that health literacy deficits are both common – present in nearly half of the U.S. population – and damaging to individual health and well-being. The report also provided a definition of health literacy that has become standard in the field: “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic information and services needed to make appropriate decisions regarding their health” (IOM 2004).

In 2006 the Missouri Foundation for Health (MFH) applied a health literacy filter to its previous four years of grantmaking and found a significant number of grantees whose programs included health literacy-related issues. This was not surprising given that the foundation’s grantmaking targets Missouri’s uninsured, underinsured, and underserved, which as a group has lower health literacy not only in Missouri but also across the United States. Shortly thereafter, MFH’s Board of Directors formally established the Missouri Health Literacy Enhancement (MHLE) program and committed five years of funding.

CRAFTING A PLAN

The foundation’s approach on this effort has been dually focused at the state level and nationally. MFH recognizes that a well-crafted plan for improvements in Missouri’s health literacy could serve as a blueprint for other states and even a national effort. In framing its plan, the foundation has focused on the impact its actions can have on the public, Missouri’s health institutions, and public policies. MFH envisions a future in which the policies and practices of those health institutions and their employees, along with those of the public, promote improved understanding of health and medical information, informed decisionmaking, health-enhancing actions, and improved health outcomes.

Initial funding for the start-up work targeted three Missouri organizations already interested in health literacy – Missouri

State University; University of Missouri; and a St. Louis-based collaborative that included Saint Louis University, the St. Louis Regional Health Commission, and others. The organizations and MFH quickly realized a more formal structure was needed to coalesce their work into a single, unified health literacy vision for the state. Thus was born the MHLE Coordinating Council, a 12-member oversight group comprised of representatives from the foundation and the three grantees. With the added assistance of a senior advisor hired by MFH to coordinate efforts, the council is working toward the development of a “Center of Health Literacy Excellence in Missouri.” Whether virtual or actual, the center is envisioned as an interactive and comprehensive health literacy resource center for health institutions, the public, and policy leaders.

The council also has adopted the following mission for MHLE as a means to improve the health of all Missourians:

- Provide access to plain language health care information.
- Offer educational resources that help health care providers communicate effectively with patients.
- Create systematic change at point of medical care.
- Improve health literacy through education and community.
- Strengthen the evidence base for health literacy.

To help achieve that mission, the council developed the following guiding principles:

- *Engage community partners* through inclusive and responsive relationship building.
- *Innovate strategically* to fill health literacy gaps.
- *Put consumers first* by providing universal access to understandable, sustainable, and service-oriented information.

WORKING AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

As a result of the collaborative effort of the council and its member organizations, MFH has already made significant strides to move the efforts in Missouri onto the national stage.

In meetings with national experts, MHLE council representatives are seeing that the efforts in Missouri could be used as a blueprint for other state-centered models as well as useful in developing national strategies to improve health literacy in the United States. There are four key elements of MFH's efforts drawing the most interest:

- the collaborative nature of the effort and engagement of universities from across the state;
- the council's desire for a proper assessment of the health literacy situation in Missouri;
- development of a health literate, plain language resource inventory; and
- the significant community outreach by Missouri State University to test this inventory with consumers across the MFH funding region.

Another important step came with approval of a joint town hall meeting on improving health literacy cosponsored by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and MFH. One of only four such public gatherings on health literacy in the United States convened by the CDC, the May 16, 2008 meeting in St. Louis drew more than 200 interested individuals and explored promising practices and lessons learned, while contributing to Missouri, regional, and national agendas for health literacy improvement. The meeting also served as an opportunity for a smaller, premeeting gathering of key representatives from foundations, experts in health literacy content, researchers, policymakers, and service providers who began a focused dialogue on how best to tackle health illiteracy.

From MFH's perspective, the town hall meeting served to galvanize the efforts of those in attendance to be levers for health literacy improvement in Missouri and beyond. Featured presentations came from predominately Midwest-based organizations and individuals working on health literacy programs. The MHLE council provided a progress report, highlighting efforts to date. It was outcomes from small group discussions to explore opportunities for strategic collaborations, however, that yielded the most promise for moving Missouri's health literacy efforts forward.

The key topics identified from those discussions were:

- measuring and understanding health literacy and related problems as well as the needs in populations,
- developing/disseminating tools to help organizations enhance health literacy among those they serve,
- developing/delivering health literacy training for health care providers and health professional students, and
- identifying additional health literacy topics of interest to the participating organizations.

The town hall meeting also solidified MFH and the MHLE council's belief that continued and expanded collaborations are critical to achieve success in improving health literacy. When foundations and partners create a common language around a health issue, the cause becomes reality and a call to

action is mandatory. Take-aways also included that the planning process should always involve the end consumers and that efforts to improve health literacy need to be slow and deliberate. Further, it was clear that efforts should use sound models and evidence-based practices, provide a clear path to resources and materials, and begin with small steps.

GAINING TRACTION

In just two years MFH believes it has made significant strides in framing the efforts to improve health literacy in Missouri. Through a combination of funding, finding suitable partners and building collaborations, deliberate planning, and engagement of national experts on this topic, the MHLE council is gaining traction for a health literacy solution. The council and senior advisor continue to engage the CDC and other experts on national work on health literacy as well as develop additional collaborations with other relevant Midwest and regional organizations. As the project's initiator, MFH is working to ensure that resources are properly prioritized, a sound business plan for the eventual development of the health literacy center is instituted, and that all partners have appropriate financial and program resources to support the center long-term. MFH also is taking steps to engage Missouri decisionmakers in the public policy discussion on health literacy.

Just recently MFH took another health literacy step by funding demonstration projects that deliberately incorporate health literacy efforts into the programming. MFH looks for these projects to help educate the council on how to best develop effective educational tools, materials, and practices, which will emerge from the portfolio of current grantees. Results will also provide additional direction for the center's future goals.

MFH recognizes that building an effective infrastructure to support improved health literacy can be very slow. Yet in a relatively short period of time, MFH is heartened by the support shown statewide, regionally, and nationally to address this critical health issue. Efforts such as the CDC's town hall meetings are important in supporting their objective to explore promising practices and lessons learned. Collaborations and partnerships formed by the MHLE council are key elements in finding a Missouri solution for improved health literacy. Together, such meetings and continuing collaborations and partnerships have a sincere chance in forming the nucleus of a national action plan to improve health literacy.

SOURCE

Institute of Medicine, *Health Literacy: A Prescription to End Confusion* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, April 2004).

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