

Healthy Communities – Addressing Health Literacy

A health encounter can be a stressful experience for anyone. This is especially true for people who have limited English language and literacy skills. For this population, completing medical forms, reading directions on a medication label, or researching health topics can be a truly daunting experience.

Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. This includes knowing what you don't know, feeling confident asking questions and knowing where to go to get answers.

[Nearly nine out of 10 adults](#) in America struggle to understand and use health information when it is complex, unfamiliar or full of medical jargon. [Research](#) shows that those most likely to experience low health literacy include older adults, racial and ethnic minorities, people with less than a high school degree or GED certificate, people with low-income levels, people with compromised health status and non-native English speakers.

In Florida, which has significant populations of non-English speakers and senior citizens, health literacy has become a critical issue, and one that Florida Blue, and its philanthropic affiliate, Florida Blue Foundation, have worked with key partners to address. Case in point is the [Florida Health Literacy Initiative](#), a unique partnership with the Florida Literacy Coalition (FLC), which engages local adult education programs and other community stakeholders to tackle this issue using a plain language, evidence-based program and [curriculum](#). “Our focus is to help adult learners, most of whom are new to this country, develop English language, literacy and math skills while at the same time gaining real world knowledge to help them make informed health decisions,” says Greg Smith, FLC’s executive director.

“Since 2009, Florida Blue Foundation has partnered with the Florida Literacy Coalition to identify and provide grants to the many grassroots efforts taking place across the state to help strengthen our most vulnerable communities,” says Susan Towler, executive director, Florida Blue Foundation and CSR at Florida Blue. “Through one-on-one support at health fairs, mock physician office visits and healthy eating and exercise programs, program participants are learning how to understand all things health – from reading their prescriptions, food labels and even knowing what questions to ask their doctor.”

This strong partnership resulted in a comprehensive program that provides funding, staff training and educational materials to Florida programs that support individuals who are learning English. The initiative has served more than 20,500 adult learners and has developed more than 300 new community partnerships. With the support of targeted mini-grants, 65 adult education and literacy organizations have developed strong health literacy programs in which students have consistently shown improvement in health knowledge.

In addition to providing grant support, Florida Blue engages with the program in a variety of ways, including local partnerships with area [Florida Blue Centers](#), which offer free fitness and educational programs. “We couldn’t ask for a better partner than Florida Blue,” says Smith. “They are truly committed to finding and supporting community-based solutions focused on helping Floridians achieve better health.”

Overall, the adult learners who have participated in this initiative have seen significant gains in health literacy knowledge as well as positive health behaviors:

- 77% of students improved their health literacy knowledge
- 98% gained knowledge and skills that will help them make informed decisions
- 89% of students shared the information they learned about health literacy with family, friends and others
- 52% of students reported adopting new healthy eating habits
- 31% of uninsured students reported applying or enrolling in at least one new insurance plan

Comments from Students

- “I [changed] my habits to eat a lot of healthy things. It also helped me learn how to protect my health.” Atlantic Technical College
- “Now I eat [healthier] and I know how I can prevent some diseases.” Atlantic Technical College
- “[Learned] how to ask appropriate questions and express my concerns about my health condition to my doctors.” Literacy Volunteers of Leon County
- “It put me on a new path with better goals for myself.” Sarasota YMCA
- “Learn English, eat healthy and go to the doctor.” Lake Worth West
- “Have to pay more attention to health and have good habits.” Learn to Read St. Johns County
- “Can talk better with other people and understand more about nutrition.” Daytona State College
- “I’m concerned about my health. I need health insurance.” Adult Literacy League
- “It has helped my vocabulary and reading.” Miami Dade College

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