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# National Library Partnership Tackles Health Literacy Gap

by [Jennifer A. Dixon](#)

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More than 90 million Americans have low health literacy, hindering their ability to take control of and address their own health needs, according to a 2004 study by the Health and Medicine Division of the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. The Public Library Association (PLA) and its parent organization the American Library Association (ALA), together with the National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NNLM), are working to expand the extent to which libraries—among the most trusted of community institutions—can address this issue. PLA Deputy Director Scott G. Allen noted that health literacy is a key topic for public libraries, as the majority of consumers struggle to make sense of the health information they encounter each day, and health information on the Internet and in media can be “misleading or downright false.” He explained, “Consumers need help understanding what’s relevant to their health, what’s legitimate, and how marketing and sensational headlines might be drawing attention away from valid research findings.” Health illiteracy can be incredibly costly, with uninformed individuals more likely to make unnecessary emergency room visits and less likely to adopt healthy behaviors. Public libraries already work extensively to disseminate health information. In 2016, PLA held a focus group looking at health information programming with public librarians from six diverse libraries. From just this small sample, PLA learned about 30 different health-related initiatives at their libraries, including reference services, education programs, health fairs, exercise classes, equipment loans, partnerships with local healthcare providers, and more. Now, new programs created by PLA, ALA, and NNLM aim to take such programming even further.

## CREATIVE COLLABORATION

PLA and NNLM recently announced a “Promoting Healthy Communities” partnership, which will develop medical information to be used by public libraries working with general audiences. In January 2017, representatives of the Greater Midwest Region (GMR) of NNLM contacted PLA and started exploring a partnership to bring National Library of Medicine resources more directly to public libraries and their patrons. The joint initiative is funded by the GMR office but is a

collaboration among members from the eight NNLM regions across the United States, and will work with public libraries across the country. The program, running from September 2017 through April 2018, addresses low health literacy from many different angles, including a website, podcasts, webinars, conferences, and tailored trainings for public library staff seeking to expand their skills and knowledge in this area. These are the work of an advisory group of NNLM representatives and public librarians dedicated to creating useful health-related materials. They have already held a webinar and started developing other communication channels, including for the ALA 2018 Midwinter Meeting and the PLA 2018 Conference. Lydia Collins, consumer health coordinator with NNLM, encouraged public libraries to recognize the health literacy resources available to them through NNLM. She said, “Public libraries need to tap into their regional medical library offices. There is so much expertise” across the nation, and “we’re here to support them and to give them ideas and connect them to tools and resources so they can do outreach in their communities.” NNLM also offers free training that targets the health literacy issues that concern public libraries, and its approach to outreach is flexible in order to react to feedback from participants about what they need most. She described the NNLM approach as meant to “motivate and inspire” libraries to make the best possible use of available tools. According to Allen, the team hopes this project will “increase knowledge and confidence among public librarians to address consumer health information needs and enable public libraries to execute quality health information programming and training. We also plan to identify strategies to share information on what public libraries are doing and resources to continue this much-needed work.” He said that there has already been “overwhelming” interest in the project, and it is apparent that the collaboration is meeting a critical need.

## **TOOLS TO TRANSFORM**

In addition, ALA has worked with NNLM to create a “[Health Literacy Toolkit](#),” part of its “Libraries Transform” initiative. This Toolkit empowers library staff with methods and multilingual resources to communicate with patrons about health issues like nutrition, healthy aging, and chronic diseases. The Toolkit also highlights the value of staff members’ skills in identifying reliable free online information about healthcare and insurance concerns. Posted on the Libraries Transform campaign website, the Toolkit offers key messages to guide discussions on health as well as suggestions for program ideas and downloadable materials like bookmarks and social media graphics. Since it launched in October 2017, there have been approximately 1,600 downloads and approximately 350 views of the program’s introductory webinar. In addition, the American Medical Association and the American Heart Association have highlighted the campaign materials on their social media feeds. The Health Literacy Toolkit launched in October, Health Literacy Month, but its impact is meant to extend far beyond, inspiring libraries to use the Toolkit materials as a jumping off point. According to Jeff Julian, Director of the ALA Public Awareness Office, “We are excited to see what librarians and libraries will do with the tools. The beauty of the Libraries Transform campaign is the work that the libraries do with it once they start using it.”

Representatives from NNLM emphasized the importance of tailoring health literacy communications for individual communities. According to Amanda Wilson, head of the National Network Coordinating Office, the organization’s work aims to “let the community dictate what health needs are the priority, so we can bring our resources to bear. Needs vary so much” from one location to another. In brainstorming approaches to health literacy outreach, NNLM has found it useful to connect with public libraries to harness their skillsets and experience, whether that means focusing on child wellbeing or programming for elderly patrons. These collaborative projects are making inroads on the lack of health literacy among the public. As Allen summarized the value of this work, “increasing access to quality health information and encouraging greater health literacy also speaks to the public library’s goals of equity and social responsibility. We know the lack of computer and Internet access increases disparities in literacy and access to health information. Public libraries can play a significant role in narrowing the digital divide by connecting the underserved with critical health information.”

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ALA

health literacy

National Network of Libraries of Medicine

PLA

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