

New Readers as Health Literacy Advocates and Resources

By Don McCormick*

All public health partners know the power of a good story. On the topic of health literacy for example, videos such as those produced by the [American Medical Association Foundation](#), the [Harvard School of Public Health](#), and the [Institute of Medicine](#) make great use of testimonials from people whose ability to make appropriate health decisions was limited by their lack of health literacy.

What you may not realize, however, is that many of those willing to share these personal stories are also active members of statewide and local health literacy initiatives. Even more surprising is that many do so despite the fact that their low health literacy is actually due to low general literacy. Can you imagine serving on a task force or workgroup and being unable to keep up with the amount and type of language skills this kind of work would require? Well, they do just that.

Take New Readers of Iowa, for example. Now celebrating its 20th year as a support group by and for adults who learned to read later in life, New Readers' approximately 30 members come from all walks of life – small business owners, retirees, farmers, and white and blue collar workers. Since 2003, the group has devoted much of its time to health literacy rather than financial literacy or other subjects that are also difficult for its members. When asked why, New Reader [Archie Willard](#) said, "Because people who care about health listen to us." Indeed they do.

Local initiatives

Unable to read until he was 40, New Reader [Doug Kapp](#) felt so strongly about the reading level of the health information he was receiving that he offered to edit some of the materials produced by his local hospital in Dubuque. Now a permanent member of



New Readers of Iowa

the document review board, Kapp is the only lay person.

"There are a lot of us out there working for an environment that is more health literacy friendly," Kapp said. "It's important to work with people from different backgrounds, fields and professions to improve health literacy. If anyone needs our assistance, we're willing to give it."

Iowa health care providers have also turned to New Readers to conduct walkthroughs of their facilities to improve signage and other communication tools to support health literacy-friendly environments. Called a "[navigational interview](#)," New Readers have used this assessment tool in a number of settings. For example, a group of 10 New Readers met with hospital administrators and conducted a comprehensive walkthrough of the 674-bed Iowa Methodist Hospital in Des Moines.

Statewide activities

Since 2003, New Readers of Iowa has been an [integral part](#) of the largest health literacy initiative the

state has ever seen. Hosted by [Iowa Health System](#), the [Iowa Health Literacy Collaborative](#) coordinated 10 on-site learning sessions, monthly conference

legislators, promoting the [AskMe3](#) materials in clinics, and bringing in an advocacy trainer. Public health and health care providers would be wise to engage local new readers in their state on any and all types of health literacy initiatives.”

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Over the years, Murr says health literacy outreach efforts by new readers

calls, two written materials training workshops, and 20 health literacy teams at senior and rural hospital affiliates, outpatient clinics and home health settings.

have done more than change the way health care providers and public health professionals think about communication. They’ve also affected a change within themselves. “By connecting with new readers, health care professionals learn the real-world needs of adults with low literacy skills. As importantly, these adults are then empowered to take charge of their own health and to take a leadership role in reaching out to their communities.”

“The New Readers of Iowa have been especially helpful in creating documents that are clear and reader-friendly,” said the project’s director, Dr. Mary Ann Abrams. “They were right there at the table and were invaluable in exploring, evaluating and spreading health literacy awareness, education and interventions. They also provided venues for shared learning to improve health communication.”

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Currently, New Readers of Iowa is one of 17 organizations serving on a work group aimed at creating the state’s first non-profit center for health literacy. By 2011, the group hopes to provide services such as training, assessment tools, resources for policy development and advocacy, research, health-related translation and interpretation, and plain language document creation.

To learn more about utilizing the unique skills and energy new readers can provide, contact Archie Willard at Millard@goldfieldaccess.net or 515-448-3213. For more information about Plain & Simple, visit www.idph.state.ia.us/health_literacy.

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Future direction

Ann Murr, Drake University [Adult Literacy Center](#) coordinator and consultant to New Readers of Iowa, says that the members are more motivated than ever to make a difference in health literacy. “There was such energy in the air at the last New Readers meeting,” Murr said. “They discussed reaching out to doctors and pharmacists in training, connecting with

