SEPA-READS: A Collaborative Approach to Health Literacy in Pennsylvania

Health literacy is complex, and it takes a collaborative approach to build and sustain measureable improvement. The purpose of this resource is to share strategies that support a successful, multi-stakeholder approach to improving health communication in Southeastern Pennsylvania.

Define the Need and Assemble Your Team

In 2010, the Health Care Improvement Foundation (HCIF) was awarded a grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Health to create a collaborative, regional health literacy initiative: SEPA-READS. With an initial focus on heart health in older adults (aged 50+), SEPA-READS began with two primary objectives:

- Enhance the capacity of health care systems and health professionals to address health literacy needs and improve older adults’ understanding of heart health information.
- Improve the ability of older adults to communicate with health care providers and staff in ways that increase their understanding of and capacity to effectively act on heart health information.

As an independent nonprofit organization and neutral convener of diverse stakeholders, HCIF brought together health systems and community organizations – reaching both providers and patients – to improve health literacy within the five-county region of Southeastern Pennsylvania. While HCIF oversees grant and project management, faculty from Thomas Jefferson University and Hospitals (TJUH) provide academic, clinical, and practical expertise in health literacy. Primary SEPA-READS partners include nine health systems (12 hospitals) and ten community organizations.
Strategies for Success

Build partnerships and seek out existing expertise in the region. The governing body for the project, the SEPA-READS Steering Committee, includes representatives from HCIF and TJUH. These organizations have complementary strengths that contribute equally to the ongoing success of SEPA-READS.

Strike a balance between on-the-ground expertise and the ability to drive change. Each partner organization identified both an internal project leader and an executive champion, ensuring proper implementation alongside organizational commitment to project goals and mission.

Acknowledge the time and resources that partners are putting forth to achieve long-term goals. Each partner organization receives a nominal stipend on an annual basis to support their involvement in SEPA-READS. The use of these funds is at the discretion of each partner.

Educate, Empower, and Build Capacity

Education and peer learning are key components of SEPA-READS. TJUH faculty members of the Steering Committee educate health care professionals and community members using evidence-based “train-the-trainer” curriculum and peer education. This model has created hundreds of “health literacy heroes” who are eager to share their knowledge with their peers and colleagues.

Community training uses peer education to activate health care consumers. Peer educators receive training on Ask Me 3™, a program that encourages patients to ask the following three questions during their health care visits:

- What is my main problem?
- What do I need to do to stay healthy?
- Why do I need to do this?

Peer educators lead educational sessions in community settings, sharing information about Ask Me 3™.

Based on a curriculum from the American Medical Association, training for health care professionals covers a wide array of health literacy topics. Attendees learn about oral communication, written communication, web design, wayfinding, and informed consent. Teach back, a communication technique used to confirm patient understanding, is cited as the most immediately applicable skill learned in the training.
Trainings are supported by interactive webinars and networking opportunities. Both foster peer learning. Hospital partners have adopted many successful practices after discussions during calls, meetings, and events. Community partners share effective strategies for enhancing their peer educator programs. After five years of working together, partner groups have developed truly candid and collaborative relationships that greatly contribute to the success of SEPA-READS. As an internal project leader at one of our hospital partners shared:

“The educational and financial resources provided through the grant were instrumental in our improving our work with health literacy issues for our patients in the hospital as well as community. It was especially helpful to work with colleagues from other health systems/facilities and learn from each other!”

Strategies for Success

Rely on the expertise of your partners and actively engage participants to shape and direct programs. Primary contacts at each partner organization identify natural leaders who would make effective educators and recruit them for training. This is an especially important factor in creating effective peer educators within the community.

Build capacity within organizations and communities. Using a “train-the-trainer” approach to deliver education to health care professionals creates
greater internal capacity for sustainable change. Empower leaders to create more leaders, and create health literacy champions within partner organizations.

** Adopt existing evidence-based strategies. ** Both community and provider education draw on existing evidence-based curricula and best practices. Before developing programming or creating new materials, assess current resources for relevant information or approaches.

** Offer a mix of resources. ** In addition to training, SEPA-READS programming includes newsletters, webinars, events, networking calls, and an online shared portal. Give participants multiple opportunities to engage with content in different media and venues.

Facilitate high-value networking, and encourage candid discussion of challenges and failures. Long-term relationships and trust between partners have been critical for creating an environment conducive to peer learning. Partners have as much to learn from one another as from the SEPA-READS Steering Committee. Create an environment where collaboration thrives.

** Sustain Progress and Offer New Challenges **
Training for health care professionals supports sustained organizational change within partner health systems. Education is the foundation for SEPA-READS, but the vision for impact goes beyond any individual training session. Each hospital partner has applied the tools and skills learned in the training, and adapted them to meet their own unique needs.
Initial changes within health systems focused on educating staff and patients, and included activities such as:

- Incorporating health literacy and teach back into staff training.
- Using teach back and “show me” when communicating with patients.
- Revising, redesigning, and standardizing educational materials for heart failure patients.

Later in the project, health systems began to tackle more challenging activities and organizational changes, including:

- Updating the organization’s website to make navigation easier.
- Developing a Patient and Family Education Committee to oversee patient education materials.
- Creating a department policy making teach back the model for patient education.

In the fifth year of the initial funding period, health systems were offered technical assistance from an expert health literacy consultant to identify and address additional areas for improvement. These projects included:

- Further review and revision of patient education materials.
- Monitoring the use and evaluating the effectiveness of teach back.
- Training registrars to collect accurate race and ethnicity data.
- Testing the usefulness of hospital maps with community members.
Strategies for Success

Showcase local best practices and case studies. Maintaining long-term relationships with partners allows us to see how knowledge and skills from trainings are applied to promote organizational change. Create opportunities for partners to share progress and innovation.

Use simple measures and real-time performance feedback. An important component of measurement is gathering relevant, high-quality data while also reducing the burden on partners to collect overly complicated measures. Process measures were self-reported via semi-annual activities reports, and these reports informed discussions during networking calls and events. Collect data to assess progress; provide feedback to partners to reinforce lasting change.

Secure help from experts. Partners’ aspirations eventually grew beyond the Steering Committee’s capacity to offer needed support. Recognize when partners would benefit from additional support, and engage experts who can provide it.

Promote a sense of community and mobilize energy around the issue. Health systems that would otherwise be competitors support one another in brainstorming, trouble-shooting, and sharing. Use collaboration to build excitement about tackling complicated issues.

Manage and Learn From Obstacles

SEPA-READS partner organizations have made evident progress since the beginning of the project in 2010. In that time, the Steering Committee has also learned a great deal about success, sustainability, and effective strategies for navigating the inevitable obstacles that arise during a multi-year project. Challenges include making the case for health literacy, maintaining health literacy champions, measuring success, and linking community and hospital partners.

Making the Case for Health Literacy

Participants in SEPA-READS trainings frequently ask how to get buy-in from key stakeholders, including hospital administration, physicians, and frontline staff. While SEPA-READS partners have discovered specific strategies that work to reach various stakeholders, the principles below are helpful in making the case for health literacy to any audience:
Know your audience and how to engage them. Identify your audience and tailor the venue and length of the educational program or session to meet their needs. Once you have a target audience in mind, determine the best way to reach them. If you’re not sure, ask.

Give your audience the information that they want and need to know. Aligning with the principles of health literacy, limit your main message to two to three main points. Emphasize topics that are most relevant to your audience. Quality, safety, cost, outcomes, patient satisfaction, skill building, and other topics within health literacy vary in importance to different stakeholders.

Provide empirical evidence and highlight recent developments in the field of health literacy. The growing body of supporting literature can be a powerful and persuasive tool. For many partners, this has been particularly important when making the case to administrators or physicians.

Understand priorities and offer the right incentives. When making the case for health literacy, organizational context informs the most effective approach. Context can either help or hinder the ability to incorporate health literacy into organizational goals.

Engaging physicians has been a specific challenge encountered by SEPA-READS hospital partners. In addition to the strategies above, creating physician champions that support health literacy and promote peer learning has been one effective tactic for reaching this group of professionals. Ultimately, physician champions are ideal leaders to make the case for health literacy within a health care organization.

Maintaining Champions
When working with the same organizations over long periods of time, turnover is inevitable. Internal project leaders have changed at least once at every hospital partner and many community partners. Losing a strong health literacy champion can negatively impact progress if a succession plan is not in place. Over time, the following strategies have proven effective in supporting successful transitions:
Encourage a team approach from the beginning. Make sure that the project teams at organizations are deep enough to survive turnover. This also increases the chance that a team member will be able to immediately and successfully transition into the lead role.

Prepare when possible. Often, staff departures are abrupt with little warning. However, in the instances where weeks or months of notice is given, work with the departing staff member on appointing and orienting a new lead.

Be attentive and patient. If the new project lead is also new to the organization or even to their role, they will receive a lot of information as they get acclimated. Let them absorb the foundational knowledge they need to to their job well, and be prepared to step in and orient them when they are ready.

Measuring Success
Evaluation is a key component of SEPA-READS planning and programming, and data is gathered from several sources to demonstrate the project’s impact. Linking health literacy programs to long-term outcomes is seen as a universally challenging undertaking. Therefore, the comprehensive evaluation plan for SEPA-READS incorporates process measures from several different sources. Evaluations, pre- and post-tests, and focus groups all yield rich data used to assess the effectiveness of SEPA-READS programming. Activities reports from partner organizations indicate the number of staff or community members educated and any newly implemented or ongoing health literacy activities.

While process measures indicate high satisfaction with trainings, strong intent to change practice, and wide reach within partners, these measures cannot demonstrate SEPA-READS’ impact on quantitative outcomes, such as readmissions rates and patient satisfaction scores. Measuring outcomes will continue to be a specific area of focus for SEPA-READS, and the Steering Committee will look to the latest research and recommendations from health literacy experts to determine the best approach to outcomes measurement.

Connecting Community and Hospitals Partners
Most educational and networking activities focus exclusively on either hospital partners or community partners, and serve to strengthen the linkages between partners within each of these groups. All 19 partners convene annually, at an in-person meeting, and periodically throughout the year via webinars intended for a
broad audience. At these events, internal project leaders and community members have the opportunity to share their work. For example, peer educators speak to issues and concerns that arise during their educational settings, while internal project leaders from hospitals present their latest initiatives to improve health literacy. As a result, all partners express great interest in exploring ways to work together more closely.

While partners are always welcome to connect outside of SEPA-READS events and programs, the Steering Committee has identified the need to create more structured opportunities for partnership and interaction between different types of partner organizations. As the steward of these partnerships, HCIF is working to build appropriate programs for mutually beneficial partnerships between hospitals and community organizations. For example, one current plan is to explore the creation of an advisory group comprising hospital representatives, leaders of community organizations, and community members to identify communication needs and the best ways of meeting them.

Celebrate Achievements and Scale Up
The success of SEPA-READS relies heavily on the efforts of partner organizations. Supporting their vision and their ability to drive change creates lasting and sustainable improvement. Internal project leaders are consistently identifying new goals, as they meet targets for training attendance and newly implemented interventions to address health literacy. The Steering Committee takes every opportunity to commend these achievements, whether in public forums or personal communications, and celebrate the progress of individual partners as well as the success of the initiative as a whole. Finally, existing partners will continue to receive financial support, technical assistance, training, and other educational programming as long as there is funding to deliver it.
SEPA-READS’ regional success has resulted in additional funding from the Pennsylvania Department of Health to support health literacy efforts in Southeastern Pennsylvania and beyond. In 2015, the SEPA-READS Steering Committee delivered training and educational programs in three additional regions of Pennsylvania. Recognizing the need to provide ongoing support to those participating in educational programs, HCIF is the lead organization in the formation of the Pennsylvania Health Literacy Coalition, a statewide organization dedicated to connecting and empowering many diverse stakeholders to improve health literacy in the Commonwealth. With representatives from over 50 organizations, the Coalition’s current activities include in-person trainings, meetings, and workgroups; online training and a new, interactive website are currently in development.

SEPA-READS will continue to function as a regional collaborative, even as statewide efforts grow, and internal project leaders in Southeastern Pennsylvania will always be considered “health literacy heroes” for their early and ongoing dedication to addressing the health literacy needs of the communities they serve.

**Collaborate for Better Communication**

Health literacy is a topic that cannot be addressed by any one individual or any single organization. SEPA-READS is an effective model for regional, multidisciplinary collaboration that engages diverse stakeholders and drives improvement and change. The SEPA-READS Steering Committee and partner organizations continue to work towards creating a sustainable culture of health literacy in Southeastern Pennsylvania and beyond.

For more information about HCIF’s ongoing health literacy initiatives, please contact Susan Cosgrove, MPA, CPHQ, Project Manager, Team Leader of Health Literacy Initiatives, at scosgrove@hcifonline.org.