

Health Strategies for Public Libraries: How the Free Library of Philadelphia addresses health barriers to literacies

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Abstract:

In 2012 the Free Library of Philadelphia learned that more than one-third of its customers were seeking health information. In response, it launched several non-traditional services that provide opportunities for overcoming health-related barriers to literacy. The work is largely experimental and leads to new ways of delivering services and a broadened definition of literacy. A sampling of these undertakings includes:

- *In 2013, the United States began mandating health insurance. The Free Library became certified to enroll patrons in insurance plans, a significant undertaking for the large proportions of our population who live in poverty and have low literacy skills.*
- *Currently under construction is a city campus that will include a library, a new site for the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, a public health clinic, and a city recreation center. This new health services public library will be entirely unique.*
- *The Culinary Literacy Center is a professional grade kitchen used to address health concerns and teach literacy: the first of its kind in the US.*
- *The Free Library is leading a campaign to increase the number of children reading on grade-level. School absenteeism is a formidable barrier to this work, and the primary cause is chronic*

asthma. Strategies to reduce asthma triggers in schools so that children are able to attend school and learn to read are being explored.

- *Our libraries are a refuge for citizens struggling with a wide range of mental and behavioral illnesses. To address these challenges, we have installed social workers in our libraries.*

Exploring innovations and emerging trends for libraries and finding the best ways to serve the public are among the Free Library's top priorities. This paper will share the investigative approach to non-traditional services which provide opportunities for overcoming health-related barriers to literacy.

Keywords: health, literacy, library, strategy

Introduction

The Free Library of Philadelphia, like many of its public library peers, has faced across-the-board change in its methods and models of service over the last several years. From e-books to budget cuts to vastly increased demand for online services and state-of-the-art technology, any library remaining relevant to its communities has had to become nimble and savvy. One of the ways we have addressed these challenges is by focusing beyond traditional print literacy, bringing library services into non-traditional places (like our outpost at the Philadelphia International Airport), and finding ways to serve the public by teaching digital literacy, and most recently, health literacy. This pivot has challenged us to face out into our communities and discover what is needed. I acknowledge that we are quite new at this and still figuring what best fits our customers. Discovering methods of teaching health literacy, however, has helped provide renewed customer focus.

In 2012, the Pew Philadelphia Research Initiative conducted a study of the Free Library, comparing it both with peer libraries across the United States and with other cultural institutions in our city. Along with discovering that the Library is a key source for job seekers and small businesses, which we had anticipated, one key finding took us by surprise. More than a third of the patrons surveyed were coming into the Library seeking health information. Since the identification of that need, the Library has launched a variety of health initiatives that aim to increase the public's access to resources, programming, and federal subsidies, among other information, thus reducing health-related barriers to literacy. With this, we have also aimed to implement methods by which our work can be evaluated and measured, an approach that allows us to track our success. This work is largely experimental, leads to new ways of delivering services, and broadens the definition of literacy.

Environment and Statistics

Before I detail some of our key initiatives, let me share some background about the landscape in Philadelphia, a city of 1.5 million. More than 50% of the population is considered low-literateⁱ, meaning they have difficulty filling out a job application or creating an email account. In 2012, it was reported that in Philadelphia only 45% of children completing 3rd gradeⁱⁱ (PDPH 19) were able to read on grade level and only 50-60% graduated from high school (21). As of 2011, approximately 25% of the city's population was living in poverty (32), meaning they struggled to buy food and pay rent. Thirty-six percent of that population is children (36). Among the largest US cities (5th in total population), Philadelphia is second lowest in reading level and second highest in poverty levels, behind only New York City (32, 36). All of these social determinants, including education and income, are widely considered to influence health.

The most significant health issues faced by Philadelphians are not uncommon in the US, namely obesity and diabetes (including for teens and children), cardiovascular disease, and hypertension (high blood pressure). Asthma is also of key concern for children, and I will talk later about ways we are looking to combat this issue. Before the implementation of the Affordable Care Act Healthcare Marketplace in 2013, nearly 20% of adults in Philadelphia did not have health insurance (171),

making doctor visits, prescriptions, and other health care costly and difficult, if not impossible, to access. In the last two years, with the implementation of federal law, all citizens are required to be insured, and many are now able to access care more affordably. I will also share how the Free Library has had a hand in supporting that nationwide effort. As is made clear with these statistics, access to basic needs and the tools necessary to succeed and thrive are nearly impossible for many of our city's people. The Free Library seeks ways to help citizens overcome these struggles.

To help us think strategically about our efforts in health literacy, we formed a Healthcare Advisory Council made up of the executive leadership of local hospitals, medical and nursing schools, insurance companies, and governmental bodies. These experts have a keen understanding of the health challenges our city faces. We look to them to guide our thinking, help us build partnerships, and share the most up-to-date resources.

Key Initiatives

The following are some of the initiatives the Free Library has recently begun in an effort to meet the needs of the public, teach health literacy, and combat health-related barriers to literacy:

- In 2013, the United States' Affordable Care Act (Obamacare) began mandating health insurance for every citizen. In order to obtain insurance, citizens are required to complete a complex enrollment process—and are encouraged to do this online—a significant undertaking for the large proportion of our population who live in poverty, have low literacy skills, and don't have access to the internet in their homes. This seemed like a perfect opportunity to apply our expertise in digital literacy to a health project. We acquired federal approval to have library staff become certified enrollment experts, able to walk patrons through the process of signing up; because the public already saw the Library as a trusted source for health information, they turned out in the hundreds to receive this assistance. That first year, however, was also a challenge. The breadth and depth of knowledge necessary to navigate the health insurance system was greater than we initially anticipated. Additionally, librarians expressed concern when patrons asked them to make recommendations about which of the dozens of health insurance plans to choose—something we were not authorized to do. After the first enrollment period in 2013, we knew we wanted to continue offering the valuable service but wanted to develop an approach that made more sense. Guided by feedback from the staff involved, we turned to a partnership model in 2014, bringing qualified, federally funded and trained experts to 22 of our libraries to offer enrollment services. This alleviated the need for advanced knowledge while simultaneously broadening our offerings. Working with partners whose everyday work was the administration of healthcare services, we were also able to use these groups to help us more effectively track and measure our impact and to understand where need was most keen.
- Currently under construction is a city campus that will include a neighborhood library, a new site for the world-renowned Children's Hospital of Philadelphia, a public health clinic, and a city recreation center. This new health-services public library, which will collaborate with its co-tenants, will be one of a kind in the United States. We envision this library space as a prototype, both in terms of its closely programmed collaboration, as well as the specialty work embedded in its staffing model, collections, and other program activities. This new campus is replacing one of our busiest neighborhood libraries and will occupy the same corner, which is above a high-traffic subway stop in a neighborhood rich in ethnic, racial, and language diversity. At this location, we will offer state-of-the-art health information services and hands-on advice from clinically trained experts alongside traditional library services. In league with our partners, we are currently conducting a community health survey and assessment, both to better inform ourselves about the community and to listen to their needs, concerns, and wishes for what will take place in the space and to guide service. We will examine what it means to be part of a public health space and aim for the location to be a hub of well-being and information sharing in Philadelphia. With our findings, we will also be able to share with

other public libraries, nationally and internationally, the ways this new model can transform the delivery of health information and build a more accessible health literacy initiative.

- In this vein of breaking ground and building new models, the Free Library launched the Culinary Literacy Center (CLC) in June 2014, a state-of-the-art teaching and demonstration kitchen which teaches basic literacy skills through cooking, and supports health literacy through nutrition education and disseminating the theory that cooking can support disease prevention and healthy lifestyles. The CLC is much more than a place for delicious meals to be made and enjoyed (though that certainly does occur). It is a driver for grade school and high school students to hone reading and math skills, for low-literacy adults to build comprehension, numeracy, and problem-solving skills, and for those new to English to build on vocabulary and conversation competency. We host programs with dozens of partners that teach local food sustainability to grade school children, vegetarian options for military veterans, growing and building healthy bodies for teenagers, and many others. Recently, we staged a competition for three high schools with culinary programs, challenging them to cook exciting, healthy recipes of their own creation. The winning recipe is now featured on the schools' cafeteria menus. One of our most popular classes is a workshop that pairs historical understanding of African food cultures and nutrition with fun cooking demonstrations, focusing on key ingredients that have roots in African heritage. We see the information offered in these classes, many of which are free and open to the public, as a way to overcome the barriers created by poverty and low literacy, such as lack of access to education resources, health care, and nutritious food. These approaches foreground preventative strides in health, and broaden our work by creating proactive content--in the guise of the programs mentioned above--and position the library as a trusted voice on healthy eating and nutrition, rather than just a place to find information. In the one year since the Culinary Literacy Center was launched, more than 3,000 people have attended programs. A good start! To capitalize on this momentum, we have implemented a tracking system that allows us to understand who we are reaching and what they have learned, steps toward understand the impact and outcomes of the program.
- The Free Library has been selected to lead a 50-partner, city-wide campaign to increase the number of children reading on grade-level, called READ! By 4th. We are one of a very few large, urban public libraries in the United States to lead a grade-level reading campaign, a national initiative taking place in more than 160 cities. While this effort aims to improve evidence-based literacy instruction and facilitated parental engagement, one shocking find in the development of the campaign was the indelible link between asthma, absenteeism, and reading on grade level. Philadelphia's children are diagnosed with asthma at astonishing rates. More than 25% of the city's children have chronic asthmaⁱⁱⁱ (Yuen 2), and in our most resource-poor neighborhoods that number is likely significantly higher. In addition, compared to their more affluent peers in the immediate suburbs, Philadelphia's students with asthma are hospitalized more often, and for more days. Asthma is, in fact, the primary cause of absenteeism (2). To combat this formidable barrier to children reading on grade level, the Free Library is engaging health literacy techniques and collaborations, attempting most directly to address this health concern in ways that our public schools have not been able to. Additionally, we will develop measures that assess our ability to impact both the health of our students and their reading levels.
- The Central branch of our 60-library system sits on a busy thoroughfare in the middle of the city. A thriving flow of tourists and denizens use this corridor daily and can take in the offerings of major art and history museums, cultural institutions, churches, and parks. Amid the bustle, you will also find our city's poorest, homeless, and most destitute citizens, waiting in line in the morning to enter our library to find refuge. The homeless struggle not only with the physical ailments that come with living outside but also with a variety of mental and behavioral health issues which are often untreated due to their lack of access to care. Because so many of these citizens see our library as a safe haven, we decided to offer support, as we do

to so many other distinct populations that use our services. It is often difficult for Library staff to know how to best serve this population, since they are largely untrained in handling behavioral and mental health issues. In order to affect positive change for both the homeless, our staff, and other patrons who may be in need of social services, we began working with Philadelphia's Department of Behavioral Health on a pilot that staffs the Library with clinically trained social workers. Each weekday for the past year, these experts have walked the halls of our building, establishing relationships with the regular patrons, providing referrals to social services, and troubleshooting difficult situations. Recently, a patron struggling with mental health issues threatened to jump from the roof of our four-story Central library. The social workers were immediately there to help the man, assisting him down from the roof, and working with him to address the source of his issues in order to refer him to the care he needed. In the past, libraries have tended to limit themselves to being purveyors of reference and education-based information, but as we take a more outward-facing approach to meeting the needs of our population, it is increasingly clear that facilitating access to social services is another method by which we can support and improve the health literacy of our city. We are now looking at ways to expand the social worker program to our branch locations, in large part because of the positive effects these behavioral health specialists have made in both our customer and staff communities.

This type of strategic action, where we remain unafraid to revise our plan, develop pilots and partnerships, and remain nimble while focusing our attention on public need, has become the driving force behind our work at the Free Library. We are advocates for risk-taking and aim continually to encourage Free Library staff to experiment and explore in order to find the best ways to serve the public. Additionally, a marked way to measure our success while keeping with the pulse of the community is to use evaluation consistently and thoroughly, finding ways to track trends, analyze data, and use anecdotal feedback to grow. Keeping these things in mind, we will continue to hone our health literacy theory, shedding our assumptions and maintaining awareness of the gaps in service that exist, both in public and behavioral health. We also remain cognizant that these efforts are wide-ranging and define health broadly and somewhat randomly, and we aim to continually re-focus our strategy in order to best meet our vision to build an enlightened community devoted to lifelong learning. A healthy community dedicated to its own wellbeing is more likely to thrive, and we strive to be an integral part of that outcome.

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