Promoting Health Literacy in Immigrant and Refugee Communities in Anchorage: The Role of Peer Language Navigators (PLNs)

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Introduction

• Health Literacy Definition: “the degree to which individuals can obtain, process, and understand the basic health information and services to make appropriate health decisions.” (IOM, 2014)

• This project intended to promote the health literacy of immigrant/refugees in Anchorage, Alaska who are adults learners of English.

• This project included a cohort of Peer Language Navigators (PLNs) representing Ethiopia, Mexico, Nepal, and Senegal.
Methods

• This work was based on a mixed-methods evaluation of a Peer Language Navigator project conducted by The Anchorage Health Literacy Collaborative (TAHLC) to train four PLNs.

• The objectives of the project included the completion of four training sessions on how to access Medline Plus and other good health information resources and the PLNs’ demonstrated ability to learn and identify information about health concerns.

• Process and outcome evaluations utilized data from pre- and post-surveys and discussion sessions during the outreach phase. Levels of confidence were measured on a likert scale.
Results

• All PLNs reported increased confidence in post-surveys and questions asked during the final discussion.

• All PLNs reported several things that they learned about health concerns, such as facts about diabetes, cancer, infectious diseases, drug and alcohol abuse, use of antibiotics, foot pain, constipation, back pain, mono, high blood pressure, HIV, fibromyalgia, child abuse, and varicose veins.

• All PLNs were able to apply this knowledge in their communities by sharing reliable health websites.

• The project is growing to include a new cohort this year that will include new languages such as Russian, Korean, Somali, and Turkish.
PLN Outreach

• PLNs provided useful health information to over 100 individuals

• PLNs gave health information individually and to groups

• PLNs gave health information to individuals speaking languages other than their native languages

PLN Outreach To Their Communities

- children 9%
- teens 12%
- adults 7%
- elderly 72%
# Health Website Access by PLNs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Medline plus %</th>
<th>Other %</th>
<th>Medline Plus count</th>
<th>Other count</th>
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<tr>
<td>PLN 1</td>
<td>92.3</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<td>PLN 2</td>
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<tr>
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<td>51.9</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average</td>
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<td><strong>13</strong></td>
<td><strong>15.75</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
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Medline Plus and other sites

PLNs used Medline Plus ~95% of the time and other sites such as Google and WebMd 13% of the time
CULTURAL AND CLIMATIC CHALLENGES

• Dietary changes and reduction of exercise: diabetes, heart disease and surgery (in some African communities they do not know what surgery is)

• Infectious disease and the use of antibiotics: frustration and lack of trust in health care provider advice

SOLUTIONS

• PLN support increases health literacy about these issues, more training will be provided by instructors

• Instructor provided basic information about differences between virus and bacterial infections, PLNs gave information in their communities easing frustration and helping build trust

“In my community we were used to eating fresh things like millet and fresh tomatoes for breakfast and now we all say “Let’s get some doughnuts!”. “ – PLN from Africa
PLN Story of Helping Navigating the Health Care System

“She had to have heart surgery at the hospital and she asked me “Why do I have to sign papers in case I die?” I explained, “so that your daughter can pick you up, it’s a good idea to sign it”. She asked me “why, if I am not dying?” I said “because the hospital knows what they are doing.”

She told me she doesn’t believe there is nothing wrong with her heart, I told her to do what the Dr says. She said she just wanted to pack her kids in her car and leave. I told her “If you are not well, how are you going to take care of your kid?”, “I think she was scared”.”
List of Health Concerns in the Immigrant and Refugee Communities

- Diabetes
- Heart Disease
- High Blood Pressure
- Infectious Disease: virus vs. bacterial infections
- Alcohol & Drug Abuse
- Cancer
- Oral Health
- Vitamins, Diet, and Exercising
- Back Pain
- HIV/AIDS
- Foot Care
- Skin Problems
- Surgery
Recommendations for similar programs in Circumpolar areas

“
There was great collaboration and synergy right from the beginning between all of the organizations involved. The team met on several occasions before the training started to refine the training, and then met in between the sessions to evaluate and revise the curriculum as necessary. The PLNs were helpful in giving us feedback as what was helpful and what was not.”

Instructor

• Use initial PLN cohorts as mentors for new PLNs

• PLNs may give information to immigrants and refugees regardless of their native language. Ex: PLN from Mexico gave information to a group of Russian and Korean community members

• Increase supportive meetings to provide space and time for debriefing. PLNs hear sad stories in their communities and need ongoing instructor support.
Conclusions

• Due to the increasing cultural diversity and mobility in the circumpolar North, there is a need for innovative programs that are both capacity-building and health promoting.

• Similar to health promotion projects undertaken in Canada, adult learners can expand their capacity to learn and teach information about health concerns in their communities.

• The PLN system has the potential of playing an important role in the advancement of health literacy across circumpolar areas.
Acknowledgements

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References

