

Health Literacy Emerging as a Priority in Delaware's Community Health Needs Assessments

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Abstract

Health literacy is increasingly recognized as a key factor in health outcomes, patient engagement, and health equity. This article examines its integration into Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs) across Delaware. Drawing on recent CHNAs and guidance from the Health Literacy Council of Delaware (HLCD), it highlights growing recognition of health literacy as a priority among health systems. While several systems incorporated health literacy into their assessments, none fully adopted the standardized questions recommended by HLCD, resulting in variation in how data are collected and measured. Findings reveal ongoing challenges in understanding health information, particularly among socially vulnerable populations, with barriers including education, language, and cultural differences. Despite these gaps, the inclusion of some level of health literacy assessment in CHNAs represents meaningful progress. Expanding the use of standardized approaches in future CHNAs will be critical to improving data consistency and advancing more coordinated, statewide solutions.

Health literacy has been increasingly incorporated into Community Health Needs Assessments (CHNAs) across Delaware, marking an important step toward improving how residents understand and engage with healthcare.¹⁻⁵ While inclusion varies by health system, the growing recognition of health literacy as a key factor in health outcomes reflects meaningful statewide progress.

A CHNA is a comprehensive assessment conducted by health systems to identify critical health needs through data collection and analysis.⁶ Increasingly, these assessments are recognizing that access to care alone is not enough. Patients must also be able to understand and use health information effectively. Health literacy, defined as the ability to find, understand, and use health information to make informed decisions⁷ plays a central role in this effort.

The Health Literacy Council of Delaware (HLCD), through its statewide strategic plan, has emphasized that improving health literacy promotes safer care, better chronic disease management, and greater health equity.⁸ To support this work, HLCD recommended a set of standardized questions for inclusion in CHNAs, drawing from sources such as the Horowitz Center in Maryland, Delaware's State Health Assessment, and HLCD's own landscape analysis.⁸⁻¹¹

These recommendations included questions for both community members (consumers) and stakeholders, including healthcare providers, community-based organizations, public health professionals, and health system leaders. Community-focused questions asked how often healthcare providers showed interest in patients' concerns, how easy or difficult medical information is to understand, and what resources could improve engagement, such as clearer communication, more time with providers, visual aids, or language access.^{9,11} Stakeholder questions explored what organizations are currently doing to address health literacy and what

additional training or resources—such as plain language or Teach-Back methods—are needed to better support patients and communities.^{9,11}

Across Delaware’s seven major health systems, five included health literacy in their 2025 CHNAs, though to varying degrees.^{1–5} Some systems, such as Bayhealth and TidalHealth, incorporated direct survey questions, collectively gathering input from more than 1,200 respondents.^{1,4}

For example, Bayhealth included questions such as “Does your healthcare provider explain things to you in a way that you can understand?” and “Is the health information you get from your doctor or nurse easy to understand?”¹ Results from Bayhealth: Kent General Hospital showed that 2,273 respondents answered “yes,” indicating they found health information easy to understand, while 62 respondents answered “no.”¹

TidalHealth’s assessment, conducted through the Healthy Delmarva partnership, included questions such as “How easy is it for you to fill out forms on your own?” and “How often is it easy to understand what your doctor tells you?”¹¹ Among 1,241 respondents, 38.2% reported “sometimes” to “never” understanding provider communication, and 31.1% reported “never,” highlighting significant challenges in comprehension.¹¹

Other systems, including ChristianaCare, Nemours/Alfred I. duPont Hospital for Children, and Beebe Healthcare, identified health literacy as a priority but did not consistently include the recommended survey questions.^{2,3,5} Still, these organizations highlighted health literacy as a critical issue affecting patient outcomes, particularly among populations with lower income, lower educational attainment, limited English proficiency, and older adults.^{2,3,5}

CHNA findings also point to key barriers. Lower levels of educational attainment in Delaware, along with growing language diversity, contribute to challenges in understanding health information.^{4,9,10} Several systems noted cultural barriers, limited translation/interpretation services, and distrust in healthcare as additional obstacles.^{2,4,5}

Despite these challenges, the inclusion of health literacy in CHNAs provides a stronger foundation for action. Health systems are beginning to align around strategies such as using plain language, improving patient provider communication, and partnering with HLCD to expand training and resources.⁸

While this year represents an important milestone, it also highlights an opportunity for greater consistency across health systems. Expanding the use of standardized questions in future CHNAs will strengthen data collection and support more coordinated, statewide solutions.

By elevating health literacy as a core component of community health, Delaware is taking a critical step toward ensuring that all residents can access, understand, and use the information they need to lead healthier lives.

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