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Action Plan to Improve Minnesotans' Health Literacy Released

*Forty-three health organizations outline six priorities
to help improve the way Minnesotans access and understand health information*

Saint Paul, Minn. (March 3, 2016) – A broad coalition of Minnesota health organizations today released the [Minnesota Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy](#), which identifies six priorities to improve health literacy throughout the state. According to research conducted by the U.S. Department of Education, nearly 9 out of 10 Americans have difficulty understanding everyday health information.

Recognizing this fact, 43 Minnesota health organizations, including insurers, providers, patient advocacy groups, and other health organizations, collaborated to develop a comprehensive plan to address this critical issue from a variety of perspectives.

The plan is the result of a six-month process to engage dozens of stakeholders statewide in conversations about barriers to health literacy and possible solutions. The engagement process was led by a steering committee consisting of representatives from the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network, the American Heart Association, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota, the Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership, and Portico Healthnet.

“Our responsibility as a health care community is to communicate clearly,” said Lin Nelson, director of legislative affairs at Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota. “When people receive accurate, easy-to-understand information about a health issue, they are better able to take action to protect and improve their health and wellness.”

Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. People of all ages, races, incomes, and education levels are affected by limited health literacy. But seniors, minority groups, and people with disabilities, low incomes, limited reading skills, or limited English proficiency are more likely to experience low health literacy. Improving health literacy is a foundational way to work toward achieving health equity.

“This broad group of stakeholders came together because we know that at some point in all of our lives, we need to be able to find, understand and use health information and services,” said Matt Schafer, vice president of government relations at the American Cancer Society Cancer

Action Network. “Health literacy can help us prevent health problems and protect our health, as well as better manage the problems and unexpected situations that happen.”

Priorities for improving health literacy

The Minnesota Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy identifies six priorities with actionable strategies to help improve Minnesotans’ abilities to obtain, understand and act on health resources. The strategies are all pieces of an integrated approach to improving health literacy.

- 1. Adopt and use health literacy best practices across all verbal, written and visual communications.** To make it easier for consumers to access and understand health information, the health care community should develop and implement best practices for providing written and verbal health information in jargon-free, understandable language.
- 2. Make information about health relevant and accessible.** Patients should have easy access to usable information presented in a variety of mediums so they can understand diagnoses, make treatment and prevention decisions, and evaluate health risks.
- 3. Increase and improve patient-centered resources.** Health care professionals should provide patients with the necessary resources to understand the health care system and receive the most appropriate care. Whether individual assistance is provided in person, by phone, or online, health care professionals should help patients coordinate and navigate health care.
- 4. Implement and enhance education opportunities at all levels.** Health literacy concepts should be integrated into primary, secondary and professional education.
- 5. Streamline processes within the health care system.** Productive partnerships within the health care system could identify and implement effective strategies and actions to lessen the burden on patients to navigate the fragmented health care system.
- 6. Invest in language and cultural resources.** Because limited English proficiency has a profound impact on health literacy, health care organizations need to take language and cultural differences into account when providing health information.

“As we worked together on this plan, it became clear that no single action and no single entity can tackle the growing issue of health literacy,” said Meghan Kimmel, vice president for partner relations at Portico Healthnet. “Translating the strategies outlined in this plan into meaningful action will require long-term commitments on the part of a broad range of stakeholders. We all need to work together to put this into action.”

Each of the 43 co-sponsoring organizations has formally committed to implementing two to three strategies identified in the plan within their own organizations. The organizations will reconvene during Health Literacy Month in October 2016 to discuss implementation efforts and opportunities to further collaborate.

“With such a complex and important issue like health literacy, it can be difficult to determine where organizations should start,” said Alisha Ellwood Odhiambo, Chair of the Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership. “Now we have the Minnesota action plan to help guide efforts across the industry. This is a major turning point in our work to improve health literacy.”

The Minnesota Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy is available for download [here](#). An executive summary is available for download [here](#).

About the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network

The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network (ACS CAN), the nonprofit, nonpartisan advocacy affiliate of the American Cancer Society, supports evidence-based policy and legislative solutions designed to eliminate cancer as a major health problem. ACS CAN gives ordinary people extraordinary power to fight cancer with the training and tools they need to make their voices heard. For more information, visit www.acscan.org.

About the American Heart Association and American Stroke Association

The American Heart Association and the American Stroke Association are devoted to saving people from heart disease and stroke – the two leading causes of death in the world. We team with millions of volunteers to fund innovative research, fight for stronger public health policies, and provide lifesaving tools and information to prevent and treat these diseases. To learn more, call 1-800-AHA-USA1 or visit heart.org.

About Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota

Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota was chartered in 1933 as Minnesota’s first health plan and continues to carry out its charter mission today: to promote a wider, more economical and timely availability of health services for the people of Minnesota. A nonprofit, taxable organization, Blue Cross is the largest health plan based in Minnesota, covering 2.7 million members in Minnesota and nationally through its health plans or plans administered by its affiliated companies. Blue Cross and Blue Shield of Minnesota is an independent licensee of the Blue Cross and Blue Shield Association. Go to bluecrossmn.com to learn more.

About the Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership

The Minnesota Health Literacy Partnership is a collaboration of health care consumers, health care organizations, and literacy groups in Minnesota. An independently funded program of the Minnesota Literary Council, the partnership was formed in January 2006 to help coordinate health literacy efforts across the state. The partnership works to improve the health of all Minnesotans through educating health care providers about the importance of clear health communication, empowering consumers to ask for clear health communication, and sharing health literacy resources. Learn more at healthliteracymn.org.

About Portico Healthnet

Portico Healthnet is a Twin Cities-based nonprofit committed to helping low-income individuals and families access affordable coverage for health care services. Portico provides personalized application and enrollment assistance for Minnesota Health Care Programs (e.g., Medical Assistance, MinnesotaCare, and MNsure programs) and an alternative coverage program for those not eligible for public programs. Learn more at porticohealthnet.org.

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