



# Health Policy Priority Brief

## Health Literacy

### What Is Health Literacy?

**Healthy Literacy** refers to the ability of individuals to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. It enables individuals to understand their healthcare options, navigate complex health systems, and access preventive services and treatments.

Healthy People 2030, a [project](#) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, defines health literacy two ways:

1. Personal - how well you can find, understand, and use information and services to make health-related decisions.
2. Organizational - how well organizations enable people to find, understand, and use information and services

### Health Literacy in the South

Health literacy in the South is particularly important given that the lack of insurance and healthcare infrastructure adds barriers to seeking timely and appropriate healthcare. In fact, [health literacy level](#)—rather than race—might be a more salient factor in use of preventive health services and in the prediction of health outcomes.<sup>[6]</sup> Individuals with low health literacy often experience worse health outcomes, such as chronic conditions, less frequent use of preventive health services, and poorer ability to manage chronic diseases. According to the Center for Disease Control's [Health Literacy Action Plan](#), limited health literacy affects people of all ages, races, incomes, and education levels, but the impact of limited health literacy disproportionately affects lower socioeconomic and minority groups.

### How Health Literacy Can Advance Equity in the South

Health literacy improves equity in the South because it empowers African Americans to better communicate their healthcare needs, allows them to manage chronic diseases, adhere to treatment plans, and engage in preventive health behaviors. The [National Assessment of Adult Literacy](#) revealed that 58% of African Americans had basic or below basic health literacy, compared with 28% of non-Hispanic Whites.

This is problematic as studies have found that health literacy is associated with low use of preventive health services and could contribute to worse outcomes for serious diseases like HIV among African Americans in the deep south. Health literacy combat this disparity and empower African Americans to overcome systemic barriers, have culturally tailored health information, and improve health outcomes.

Metrics of success include:

1. Improved Health Knowledge: Increase in individuals' knowledge and understanding of key health concepts, preventive measures, and disease management strategies.
2. Enhanced Health Behaviors: Adoption of healthier behaviors and lifestyle choices among individuals, including dietary improvements, increased physical activity, and regular preventive care utilization.
3. Increased Access to Healthcare Services: Improvement in individuals' ability to access and navigate healthcare services, including scheduling appointments, understanding medical instructions, and adhering to treatment plans.
4. Reduced Disparities in Health Outcomes: Reduction in disparities in health outcomes and healthcare utilization between socio-economic groups, racial/ethnic populations, and geographic regions.

## Health Literacy Initiatives

There are several initiatives currently in place in Southern states that serve as great models for those states that have yet to adopt or establish such programs and initiatives so that people can make well-informed decisions about their health because they have the information they need to do so. The promotion of, funding for, and access to these initiatives and resources should be maintained and increased to ensure that all who could benefit from them can be equipped with the tools needed to prevent health problems, protect their health, and better manage when problems do arise.

1. Alabama: The Alabama Health Literacy Initiative is designed to support patient-centered educational opportunities, guide outreach activities, and create partnerships to advance health literacy and improve health outcomes in the state of Alabama.
2. Arkansas: The University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences' Center for Health Literacy has a mission to improve society and population health by making health information easier to understand and use
3. Florida: The Florida Health Literacy Initiative provides health-education resources to local adult programs for English Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) and to family literacy programs so that students in these programs can make informed choices about their health and nutrition.
4. Kentucky: Health Literacy Kentucky is a statewide coalition working for a healthier commonwealth through improved health literacy. Their resources include tools for teaching community members, healthcare professionals, and teens interested in the healthcare profession, as well as advocacy information for consumers, providers, and policymakers to address billing and coding issues for preventative services that should be free.