

# TAKING DOWN THE WALL OF WORDS

*A Handbook  
for  
Community  
Agencies*



**TAKING DOWN THE WALL OF WORDS**  
**A Handbook for Community Agencies**

Part 2



**The John Howard Society of Canada**

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## Preface

Nineteen-ninety marked the start of what many people are calling the “literacy decade.” So, with funding from the National Literacy Secretariat of the Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship Canada, a Project Management Group consisting of representatives of the United Way-Centraide Canada, the YMCA Canada, the Movement for Canadian Literacy, the Canadian Association of Elizabeth Fry Societies and The John Howard Society of Canada, looked for ways in which community agencies can have an effect on improving literacy levels in Canada.

Researchers across the country found examples of how community agencies can make sure that people who cannot read and write well *can* use their services. They also came up with ideas on how these organizations can be an important link between the people who have difficulty reading and writing and the many literacy programs available across Canada.

The research team found that many of the people served by community agencies have trouble reading and writing. Low literacy is often one of many problems faced by people who are poor, sick, out of a job or in trouble with the law.

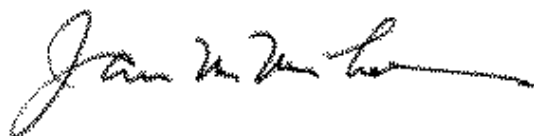
The research results are reflected in two volumes. Part 1, *Taking Down the Wall of Words: Community Agencies and Literacy* gives an overview of the problem of illiteracy and the role of community agencies in alleviating it. This handbook, part 2 of the series, is a practical guide to making literacy an integral part of your agency’s operation and thinking.

This handbook is addressed to managers and program directors at community agencies and is designed to assist them in implementing literacy activities. We approach this process pragmatically and have resisted making any assumptions about the nature of your agency. Instead, we provide observations and ideas and encourage you to use what is best for you.

On behalf of the Project Management Group, I would like to thank the many individuals and organizations who were so helpful to our researchers. I would also like to express my most sincere thanks to the research team who are identified in the acknowledgements at the end of the handbook. These people from various parts of Canada and from divergent backgrounds provided enthusiasm and competence which made our task much easier.

In the acknowledgements, you will also see a list of the management group. This was a small coalition of national agencies who came together to do this job because they themselves were struggling with what to do in their agencies once they agreed that literacy was important. These people greatly assisted the project through wise counsel and supportive feedback. As well, they facilitated our promotion and distribution. I am most grateful to them.

Special appreciation is extended to the Secretary of State, Gerry Weiner, and the Literacy Secretariat of the Ministry. The staff with whom we have dealt have been unfailingly cooperative, concerned and helpful. It can be truly said that this project could not have been accomplished without their help.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James M. MacLatchie". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

James M. MacLatchie  
Executive Director  
The John Howard Society of Canada  
Chair, Project Management Group

March, 1991

## Introduction

### Community Agencies and Literacy

Community agencies provide social, economic and moral support to people who are trying to deal with poverty or who have needs for housing and food or medical and legal assistance. For some of the people who use your agency's services, an inability to read and write well, or at all, may be a factor contributing to the social and economic disadvantages they face. You can ensure that literacy barriers do not keep people from using your services. You can also form an essential link between literacy upgrading programs and many of the people who could benefit from them.

A low level of literacy is a major problem for many Canadians. In this information-centred age, an inability to read and write can keep people from many of the benefits and privileges of citizenship and economic progress. In the process of empowering individuals, community agencies can help Canadians improve their literacy skills. You can be part of the literacy solution.

There are important roles for community agencies in promoting literacy. Many of the people whose literacy skills are weakest use the services of community agencies. Low literacy may be one of the reasons why people cannot find work, for example, and need social assistance. Poor reading skills can keep some people from having the money or the awareness to buy and prepare healthy food

or to use medicine properly. Also, poor nutrition or health habits can mean that people have a greater need for health services.

Many community agencies which have no direct link to literacy recognize that it is an important part of much of their work. Some recognize that their mandate to contribute to the health and wellbeing of individuals involves a commitment to meeting people's literacy needs. The mission of the YMCA Canada, for example, states:

The YMCA is a world-wide fellowship dedicated to the growth of persons in spirit, mind and body, and in a sense of responsibility to each other and the human community.

This philosophy is reflected in the work of YMCAs across the country. They see literacy as an essential part of their mandate and are committed to being sensitive to people's literacy skill levels in the way they deliver their programs.

A commitment to literacy can bolster the missions and mandates of community agencies by enhancing personal empowerment and independence. Your agency has a

dual role in literacy. It can provide a link between literacy programs and the people you serve who could benefit from them. You can also make sure that your agency doesn't keep low literate people from using your services by putting difficult literacy demands in their way.

## **We're Happy to Help Out**

No one promotes illiteracy. Most of us believe that people who want to understand books, charts, forms, pamphlets and posters should be helped to make sense of the words, numbers and ideas around them. If we know or suspect that people cannot read or write, we gladly read them the letters they need to have read, fill in forms for them, tell them where Surrey Street or City Hall is. We want all Canadians to be able to use the services they want, buy the things they need and vote for the people they believe will best represent their interests. Many of us are generous with our time and lend our skills to others.

However, doing literacy tasks for people who cannot read or write only helps them for a moment. When they next need to fill in a form or read a letter, they may not be able to find someone to lend a hand. Sometimes, by helping out, we become part of the problem. We leave a person no better able to handle the literacy challenges they come across every day. As well, we waste a chance to support the person in making a major life change — becoming literate.

## **The Wall of Words**

It's easy to be in favour of literacy and against illiteracy. But there is a larger problem that isn't covered by our concern about illiteracy. Low literacy is harder to recognize and so it is easy to ignore. Poor reading and writing skills can limit people's lives in almost as many ways as illiteracy. People who can read and write only basic things may not be able to understand your organization's application, registration or information forms. With their limited reading skills, they may not know what you mean when you write about "health practitioners" or "violation of parole," "basic nutritional requirements" or "emergency overnight accommodation." If you use technical terms in your forms and other documents, people may need a high level of literacy to use your organization's services.

Community agencies, schools, governments, hospitals, professionals and others can lead the way to simpler, more straightforward, easier-to-read forms, pamphlets and documents. You can use language in ways that people with poor literacy skills can understand and that all of us can be more comfortable with. Fancy words, complicated forms and confusing procedures may slow us down, but these things can actually keep people with low literacy skills from using certain services or doing some tasks.

With a limited ability to read, people can get by. They can find the bus they take to work every day, get someone to help them figure out the



symbols on the machines they have to use, have a friend read their job instructions to them and learn to recognize the words they need to know to get their jobs done. When someone asks them to read a memo, they may say they've forgotten their glasses. If they are asked to take notes at a meeting, they may say that their handwriting is terrible and ask if someone else could do that job.

When they come into your offices, people with low literacy skills may say they don't have time to fill in your form. They may ask if they can bring it back tomorrow, then ask a friend to complete it for them. If they can't find a friend that they can trust with their secret of poor reading and writing skills, they may just never come back. They are the people who don't seem to bother following up.

We can all take responsibility for the difficulties some people face when they try to use the services of community organizations. But there are many things that can be done to keep them from walking out without the information or help they need. Your forms can be made simple to read and easy to fill out. Employees who greet people can offer help in completing forms. Videotapes in reception areas can let people know how the agency works and that counsellors are available to assist them with their forms.

Your organization's literacy demands may put up a wall that keeps out people with low literacy skills. This book is about taking down that wall of words. The ideas, processes and procedures suggested in this handbook can help you make your organization more accessible to people

with low or no literacy skills. They may even make your work easier by taking the mystery out of your forms, pamphlets or programs.

If the people who use your services can understand your information and procedures a little bit better, they will call on your staff and volunteers less often for help. There will be fewer mistakes on forms and people will have a better idea of what you can and cannot do for them. Choose any of the ideas and suggestions in the pages that follow that might make your life and the lives of the people you serve a little bit easier.

## What is Literacy?

Literacy is much more than knowing the alphabet and being able to read a few words or sentences. It is important to understand the meaning of the words and ideas we read and the context in which they are used. Being literate means that people are able to handle the words, sentences and ideas they need to read every day. It allows people to take the information they have read and apply it for their own purposes.

There is no magic dividing line between people who are literate and those who are not. According to a 1990 Statistics Canada survey on literacy, just about every Canadian who can speak English or French is able to read and write some things in one of our official languages. And new Canadians or Native Canadians who may not be able to read or write in English or French may none the less be highly literate in the language they learned as a child and in which they have studied and worked.

Beyond the ability to read and understand materials, literacy enables people to learn new things, such as new technologies. With workplaces changing daily, people need to be able to learn to use new cash registers, computers and computer-controlled robots and machinery, for example. Good reading and comprehension skills are essential for us to handle the training programs for these technological

tools.

Literacy is a basic need in our world. Without an ability to read and write well, people suffer poorer health, unemployment and poverty. The numbers that follow tell the story.

## Literacy Facts and Stats

More than one in three Canadians have reading skills that aren't adequate to read and use the written materials they come across every day. According to a 1990 survey:

The 1990 Statistics Canada literacy survey found that:

7 per cent of Canadians cannot read;

9 per cent can only read simple words;

22 per cent can read simple sentences;

62 per cent have adequate reading skills.

A survey of Canadians' reading skills conducted by Southam News in 1987 found that large numbers of Canadians cannot handle basic reading tasks.

## Literacy Notes

According to the 1987 Southam survey:

Seven out of ten Canadians couldn't find the amount owing on a tax table.

One in two people couldn't find a store in Yellow Pages ads.  
29 per cent couldn't identify the amount owing on a telephone bill

13 per cent couldn't find the traffic sign they'd been asked to circle on a page.

## Literacy and Poverty

Literacy is a close cousin of poverty in Canada. It can keep people from finding good paying jobs or any job at all. With a low family income, people tend to have poorer health. Their children often face unfair disadvantages in coping with others' attitudes or with schools and other systems that assume all of us have enough money to do what they expect us to do.

In 1986, Statistics Canada found that three out of five people with less than a grade 9 education were out of the labour force. People with low literacy skills may give up hope

of finding a job and stop looking for work.

The children of poor parents are often labelled in school. Their teachers may have low expectations for their performance which the children then fulfill. When neither the children's parents nor the school are able to help them, the children may simply drop out before they have learned adequate reading skills.

In Ontario, the Ontario Literacy Coalition found that the drop out rate for children from poor families was double the average drop out rate and that three out of four poor

## Literacy Notes

According to the National Anti-Poverty Organization.

- Low literate adults earn only 2/3 the income of other adults. On average, they earn \$13,600 per year.
- People with poor literacy skills are twice as likely as others to be unemployed. They are many times more likely to need social assistance.

## Literacy Notes

In Ontario:

- 1 in 3 poor people have less than a grade 8 education.
- Poor people don't live as long as other people. Life expectancy at the low end of the income scale is 67 years. People at the high end of the scale can expect to live 73 years.

adults had not completed high school.

Adults with low incomes are more likely to have disabilities. The children of poor families have more health problems than other children.

The 1987 Southam Survey of Canadians' literacy skills found that Quebecers, like many others, don't see literacy skills as important or relevant to their lives. Almost 90 per cent said that they had never felt penalized because of problems with their reading and writing skills. Three years later, the Statistics Canada survey found that more than 40 per cent of Quebecers had reading skills that were inadequate for everyday life.

A 1981 report for western Canada and the 1987 Southam Survey found that only two per cent of people who might benefit from literacy programs actually take such training. When poverty and literacy are problems, the lack of child care services, the cost and time needed for travel to literacy courses and the long hours that people may need to work to earn enough money for the essentials of life, may all prevent low literate adults from taking literacy training.

It can take years to learn to read, depending on how good a person's skills are at the outset of literacy training. Perhaps that is why so few people who could benefit from the

## Literacy Notes

In Quebec, the Southam survey of literacy skills found that:

- 1 in 2 people don't consider it very important to know how to read, write or speak well. The same number of people don't think it is important to have attended high school.
- 38 per cent of respondents don't believe reading and writing are essential for their work.

training actually register in programs. It may be easier to say that one wants to improve one's skills than it is to actually sign up for a program that may not show results for some time.

It is important to be straightforward about a person's training program when encouraging them to improve their skills. A literacy instructor can make a realistic assessment of how long the individual's literacy training program may have to be,

based on the level of skills the person has and the amount of time the person is able to commit to literacy training.

If the volunteers and staff of community agencies, who each day see many of the Canadians who cannot read and write well, can encourage even a few people to improve their literacy skills, the horrifying statistics on illiteracy in Canada may slowly improve.

## Looking for Literacy Barriers

### The Literacy Audit

Over time, looking for literacy barriers in an organization can become an automatic process. When staff and volunteers get used to working in ways that enable people with low or no literacy skills to use an organization's services in comfort, they can spot troublesome practices and excessive literacy demands more easily. Until that point of continuous review is reached, occasional literacy audits can uncover literacy barriers.

A literacy audit is like an organizational or program audit, in that it involves systematically reviewing all elements of an organization's operations to assess the extent to which it is literacy sensitive. A literacy audit can help you spot literacy barriers, such as unnecessary forms, and help you identify opportunities to promote literacy training among the people who use your programs and services. Each section of this handbook can assist your organization in analyzing your programs, procedures or paperwork to improve their accessibility and sensitivity to literacy.

Before you do your first literacy audit, you may find it helpful to consult with a representative of a literacy organization in your area.

By describing your service, the people who use it, and your procedures to a literacy professional you may get some useful

guidelines and suggestions on where to look for barriers and on how to remove them. If a literacy worker or someone who is taking a literacy-upgrading program can visit your organization, he or she may help you to see your offices and processes with new, literacy-aware eyes.

### What is Your Literacy Quotient?

There are six main areas of your organization that can be reviewed in a literacy audit. You might choose to concentrate on one, several or all of these areas at a time. Through a literacy audit, you can assess your organization's literacy quotient by systematically reviewing:

how you set up your offices;

how you communicate;

how you do your work;

how you train your staff;

how you can refer people to literacy-upgrading programs;

how you can work with other agencies concerned with literacy.

The following sections of this handbook can help you do a literacy audit of your organization. You may choose from a series of ideas and suggestions to improve your agency's literacy quotient. Achieving awareness and sensitivity to literacy in an organization's programs, policies and procedures takes time.

There are no magic solutions. You know your organization best. The ideas in this book can assist you to develop solutions that are tailor made to respond to your agency's literacy challenges.

## Caring for Your Environment

How does your organization appear to people with low or no literacy skills who have not used your services before? The image you project is important for first impressions and can be intimidating if it is heavily reliant on the written word.

### Help People Track you Down

How do people generally find out about your organization? How do they find your offices? If you advertise, make sure you use simple language and include any logos for your organization that are well known. If there is no room for a simple map showing your location in relation to well-known landmarks, you could tell people that bus number 95 will take them to your door. The same information may be helpful to people who telephone for information and an address. “We’re right next to the dry cleaners, across from

Lion’s Gate Mall,” may be more useful than just a street address.

### On the Outside

Take a look at your street level front door signs. Is your street address clearly visible from a distance? Your organization name may be long or complicated, but there may still be simple ways to convey what you are so that people can find you easily. A sign saying “Help for Families” before your official name or a graphic showing a family may be easier for people to identify than something such as “Wentworth County Professional Family Services.”

Where people speak different languages from the majority around them, it may be appropriate to put up signs written in those languages as well as your main language of

## Literacy Notes

Help people find you and find out about you:

- Tell people what buses stop nearest your offices.
- Use small maps showing well-known landmarks in your ads and handouts.
- Use simple language in your advertising.



## Literacy Notes

Make sure that your signs:

- Use simple language and well-known graphics;
- Are visible from the street, the entrance hall, or the elevators;
- Are bilingual or multi-lingual, if this is appropriate.

business. Government offices and community services in Iqaluit use English and Inuktitut on their signs as a matter of course.

How easy is it to find your door? If you're on the fifth floor of an office building, is there a clear sign on the ground floor to direct people to your offices? A sign opposite the elevators on your floor is also helpful, as is an open door policy. It's much easier for all of us to see inside the offices we have to approach instead of having to open a door into a crowded waiting room and look around for something that looks like a reception desk.

### On the Inside

How you receive people into your organization for the first time is critical. Once people know you and have met someone in your organization whom they have found helpful, they are less likely to be intimidated by literacy barriers in your information and practices. But until that time, the people who greet newcomers and the processes for your clients and customers, can set the stage for successful or troublesome starts to relationships with the people you serve.

### *Welcome! The Reception Area*

Make sure the receptionist is visible from your doorway and is able to see people as they come in. If that is not possible, make it clear where people can find the reception desk. Use graphic signs and arrows if necessary.

If you have any say about colours used in reception areas, remember that bright colours are inviting to people but become discomfiting after a period of time. That's why fast-food restaurants tend to use them. Softer colours are easier to take for longer waits.

Try to give people some privacy when they speak with the receptionist. They may want to explain that they can't complete the form they've just received on their own.

### *First Impressions - Beware the Paper Tiger!*

Surround people with posters that say things with pictures rather than words. Keep your organization's mountain of paperwork out of sight of the waiting area. Watch out for bulletin boards crammed with wordy pieces of paper.

Avoid handing people a form to complete as soon as they walk in your door. If completing forms is a must, allow reception staff the time to help people fill them out. “Would you like me to fill this form out with you or would you prefer to do it yourself?” takes the literacy burden off the person using your services. The staff time used then may save trouble and

time further down the road.

Your organization may prefer to have forms completed by counsellors. If so, let people know that they can fill out the form while they wait or take it in with them later to work on it with the counsellor.

## Plain Language Primer

We have all been the victims of bureaucratic writing. We've had to read a sentence or a paragraph over and over to try to understand what the writer was saying or deciphered instructions only to exclaim, "Why didn't they just say that? It's so simple!" Plain language writing is the art of stating things clearly. Its goal is to make the writer understood. It does not make language dull or insult the reader's intelligence, but it avoids "fancy language" when a "plain" expression will do.

Plain writing can make your organization better understood by the people who use it. It is useful when serving people with low literacy skills, but it helps all of us to avoid misunderstandings and ambiguities. This plain language primer will help you present information about your organization clearly, to the benefit of people with a wide range of reading skills.

### Look at Your Forms and Materials

Ask someone who doesn't know your organization well to take a critical look at the kind of materials and forms you give to the people who use your services. Let the person know that you are not testing him or her, but that you want to know whether you have stated things clearly and whether your paperwork is easy to use.

You can also determine which of your forms and materials might need changes by checking with staff to find out which material raises the most questions. A lot of follow-up questions may mean that the information is not stated clearly or that more information should be included in your brochure.

If you don't feel able to do a wholesale revision of your written materials, take a look at the list of items that are scheduled to be revised and reprinted over the next year or so. Then build in time to approach each written product from a plain language perspective. It takes time to write simply. Try to take the time you need.

One organization found that it had to train its staff members and volunteers to use the new forms it had designed. If your staff needs training to understand your materials, how can people who are using your services for the first time be expected to handle them?

Be prepared to hear that your forms look complicated and that the information seems boring. If you ask a person to paraphrase what they learned in reading your information, you may find that people don't really understand what you're trying

to say. If the news is bad, take heart. Making your organization better understood can bring you extra benefits. Here are some suggestions you might find helpful.

## **Ease the Paper Burden**

You may be used to saying everything about your organization in written pamphlets, but could you use video or audio tapes? A reception-area video can play repeatedly to let people know how your organization works. Posted drawings and photos can do the same job, perhaps for less money.

Audio tapes can be used instead of pamphlets to let people know more about their legal rights or how their eligibility for government benefits is determined, for example. You may want to set up a listening library for use on your premises or on a homeloan basis. Audio tapes can supplement or reinforce the information in your pamphlets.

Where paper-based information is needed, try to use pictures, graphics and, of course, simple text to get your message across.

## ***Keep it simple***

Try not to write information geared toward the public in the same kind of language used by your staff everyday. The technical terms and bureaucratic procedures that are second nature to people working in an organization are often meaningless to the uninitiated. When writing pamphlets, letters, instructions and other materials, keep the following plain language principles in mind.

## ***Limit each sentence and paragraph to a single idea***

If you find yourself writing something like, "Follow the abovementioned routine daily for the first week, taking care not to exceed the number of repetitions prescribed," try instead to separate the ideas. In one sentence, advise people to follow the daily routine for one week. Then, in the next sentence tell them what they are to do after that. What happens in the second week? And thereafter?

The warning about not exceeding the number of prescribed repetitions should be mentioned separately. If the warning is important, you may want to highlight it by placing it first in the instructions or, at least, giving it its own paragraph, perhaps also explaining why the warning should be heeded.

## ***Use short sentences, simple words***

Beware the run-on sentence! It is easier for people to focus on a single idea at a time. A sentence such as, "In the event that provisions are inadequate for the initial period, you may request special emergency supplies, which are limited to essential items and which can only be provided under extraordinary conditions," has too many thoughts and probably more information than the person could possibly need. A number of improvements can be made:

Words such as "provisions," and "inadequate," and expressions such as "initial period," and "special emergency supplies" can easily be replaced with more common, more easily understood terms. If the "provisions" are

food, say food. Doesn't "in the event" really mean "if"? Try, "If you don't have enough food for the first two weeks, you can ask for more."

Don't say "initial period" if you are talking about two weeks or another set period of time. Always use the clearer term. And don't vary the terms you use to try to make things interesting. It is easier for people to understand things when terms are used consistently. We also remember more when important information, such as "two weeks" is repeated in a text.

If you must use a difficult word, try defining it in the same sentence or the next: "The median age of workers will rise to 38 over the next ten years: With 50 per cent of workers over age 38, employers will have to consider training programs for older workers."

Keep paragraphs short. Even if one idea has to be discussed at length, divide the information into short paragraphs, each containing an important element. Compare these two notices:

All recreation facilities are to be kept neat and orderly. Users are asked to return equipment to storage bins located at the north end of the exercise area after each session. Report any equipment damage to the facilities manager. Keeping these facilities and sports equipment in good repair is the responsibility of all members. Please do your part.

All recreation facilities are to be kept neat and orderly.

Users are asked to return equipment to storage bins located at the north end of the exercise area after each session. Report any equipment damage to the facilities manager.

Keeping these facilities and sports equipment in good repair is the responsibility of all members. Please do your part.

The second presentation of this information highlights the instructions regarding the storage of equipment and the reporting of any damage. It looks easier to read because the block of text is less dense.

### ***Organize your ideas***

Say the most important thing first. For each paragraph, each section of a pamphlet or a letter, there is one idea you most want to get across. Say it first.

Members are asked not to leave wallets in unprotected lockers. If you leave your wallet in a locker, use a combination lock, Five people have had their wallets stolen in the past two weeks.

Compare that to:

In the past two weeks, five people have had their wallets stolen from the locker area. Please take your wallet with you or use a combination lock on your locker to protect your belongings.

In the first example, members may wonder why they are being asked to change their habits. If they are not told at the beginning that there has been a security problem, they may not bother reading the whole note. State your main point first.

### ***Use informal language***

Bureaucratic language is everywhere. For some reason, people often prefer to say things in complicated ways, perhaps because they believe it sounds more official. You have probably seen sentences like this:

Incarceration is the usual consequence of repeated criminal behavior by juveniles.

The ideas can be stated more simply:

Young people who break the law more than once or twice usually end up in jail.

The second phrasing probably does the job as well as the sentence above, but it uses simpler language and it puts first things first. The sentence deals with young people, so they are mentioned first. Going to jail is the result of breaking the law, so the idea of jail follows the idea of breaking the law. Putting ideas in logical order helps people make sense of what you're saying.

Another example:

Salary demands from the union are being considered by management.

Compare this to:

Management is considering the

union's salary demands.

The key idea is that the demands are under consideration, so that should be stated first. It is clearer to state the "union's demands" rather than the "demands of the union." "Management is considering" is more easily understood than "are being considered by management."

Informal language just helps us be understood. It shouldn't change the sense of what you want to say. Being informal doesn't mean using slang expressions. Try to use proper language and grammar. The rules of language usually help us to be better understood, after all.

### ***Use drawings, pictures, graphics and caution***

It may be helpful to use a picture instead of words when this can be done, but be careful about the images you use. There may be cultural sensitivities among the people who use your services. Make sure that symbols that are familiar to you mean the same thing to them. The easiest way to find this out is to test your drawings with some of your clients or customers. If a drawing or image is not clear to people, don't use it. It may only confuse matters.

### ***Avoid stereotypes, respect differences***

Make sure that your information portrays women, men and people from cultural, racial and religious minority groups in a positive, nonstereotypical way. It is important that the people who use your services see themselves in your literature and that that portrayal be positive.

If your services are offered in more than one language, make sure your literature is too. Try to ensure that translations are of high quality, that they are written in plain language and that they reflect your intended meaning. Get a staff member or client to review all language versions to compare the meaning of the materials.

### Appearances Count

People are more likely to read materials that are pleasing to look at and don't seem to require a lot of effort to read. You can give your materials this appearance by using small blocks of text, a large print size, graphic designs where appropriate and highlighting for important information.

The following text buries important information:

A résumé is the job hunter's most important tool. It sums up all your experience, abilities and skills in ways that will interest employers. We'll help you organize information about your work experience, volunteer work, education, and training in ways that can get results! For example, did you realize that experience in volunteer work such as coaching a children's sports team, collecting donations for charity, and organizing fund-raising events can help you find a job? We'll show you how to make the most of the skills you have.

It can be reorganized to say the same things, but in a more pleasing way:

A **résumé** is the job hunter's most

Important tool. It sums up all your experience, abilities, and skills in ways that will interest employers. We'll help you organize information about your:

- work experience,
- volunteer work,
- education, and
- training

in ways that can get results!

For example, did you realize that experience in volunteer work such as:

- coaching a children's sports team,
- collecting donations for charity, and
- organizing fund-raising events can help you find a job? We'll show you how to make the most of the skills you have.

Don't overuse highlighting. Use it to draw attention to the most important points you are making.

Use point form for lists of items that are all related to one idea. Point form is most effective for series of brief phrases, but it can also help to break up text when you are presenting a number of lengthier ideas related to one theme.

When listing ideas in point form, try to avoid single, long lists. It is easier to understand and remember two to four items in a list than it is to deal with twenty. If you have twenty things that must be

mentioned, try to group similar items together. Compare the following lists:

Campers will require the following equipment:

- Sleeping Bag
- Dishes
- Ground sheet
- Cutlery
- Air mattress
- Fishing equipment
- Waterproof duffle bag
- Warm clothing with identification labels
- Cooking utensils

Campers will require the following equipment:

**Bedding:**

- Sleeping bag
- Ground sheet
- Air mattress

**Clothing:**

- Warm clothing with identification labels
- Waterproof duffle bag

**Food preparation:**

- Cooking utensils
- Dishes
- Cutlery

**Other:**

- Fishing equipment

Avoid using very small type sizes and consider any special needs of your target audiences when designing your information materials.

## **Keep to Form**

The use of some forms is inevitable. Make sure that the forms you use are as simple and straightforward as possible. Could you get by with asking for people's "Name" instead of "Surname, Given Name, and Initials," for example? Leave lots of room for people to write the answers to your questions and don't ask information you can do without. If some of the questions you have to ask simply cannot be worded in brief phrases using basic language, you may be better off saving them for interviews with counsellors. It may be easier to explain what the questions mean in person instead of on paper.

With plain language materials, your organization may be more successful in reaching the people you want to serve. You may find that you have to spend less time explaining things that have already been covered in writing. And there may be fewer misunderstandings about your procedures and practices. There can be big payoffs for a little plain talk.



## Programs, Policies and Procedures

Once people learn one way to do things at work, it can be difficult to change habits. “That’s the way we’ve always done it,” and “There’s no time to do things that way,” can be the catch-phrases of complacency. Change doesn’t have to be disruptive. Also, benefits that accrue days or even months after a change has been implemented are just as important as immediate payoffs.

### **Make Literacy Part of your Mission**

Use the wording of your organization’s mission statement to promote your commitment to literacy. How does literacy relate to your organization’s goal of empowering people, increasing their ability to live independently or providing them with legal assistance? If literacy sensitivity is not mentioned specifically in your agency’s list of goals, you may wish to expand your mission to include it. Then literacy awareness can form part of all your activities. It can be a routine part of program design, for the programs you now administer and for those you will add at some future date.

Even if literacy isn’t part of your agency’s mission, it can help to define the objectives of specific programs and projects and be part of the agency’s overall operational

objectives. Literacy concerns can be built into operating procedures at all levels of your agency’s operations from client literature to volunteer promotion. Furthermore, literacy sensitivity is noticed by funding organizations who are always seeking evidence of agency impact and relevance in the community.

If your strategic plan calls for a communication plan, build in elements which will routinely screen promotional materials or monitor client intake procedures for literacy needs. If literacy is part of your program design to begin with, it will become second nature for staff and volunteers. Once agencies become sensitive to literacy needs, staff may, for example, make clients and customers aware of literacy training programs in the community. Then, if the demand for this kind of support grows, agencies might consider arranging to bring the literacy agency’s services in house.

Each agency’s response will depend on their clients’ preferences. Some clients may want to take literacy training away from your agency because they would prefer to be “students” rather than “clients.”

The following suggestions may reflect the ways you already do business. Some of the ideas may be

new. All are designed to enhance your organization's accessibility to people with low or no literacy skills.

## **We're Easy to Deal With**

First impressions mean a lot. The procedures people face when they approach your organization for the first time can establish a relationship of trust or fear, depending on the literacy demands made on people. The attitudes of staff and volunteer personnel are very important factors in making people feel comfortable with their level of literacy and your services.

## **Yes, We're Interested**

Like all of us, people with a literacy problem will accept assistance, if it is offered in a way that shows respect. Reception staff and counsellors who spend time explaining programs and procedures and offering assistance in the same way to all clients or customers are likely to hear honest admissions of people's limited abilities to read and write.

On the other hand, when people receive a form from someone who barely looks at them while reciting routine instructions, they are not likely to want to confide their problems. They are much more likely to disguise their inability to read or write, get help elsewhere or just leave, sometimes in sadness or anger.

The Plain Language Primer in this handbook has some suggestions on how to reduce the paperwork your agency provides to and demands of people who use your services. It also describes how you can write materials to be understood by people

with low literacy skills. If you must greet people with a form, offer help with it and not only to those people you think might need help.

"Would you like me to fill that form out with you, or would you prefer to do it yourself?" can be the standard phrase you use, instead of "Do you need a pen?" If there is room, give people some privacy to complete the form on their own or to sit down with reception staff or a counsellor to do so. Put people, not paper, first.

## **Avoid Ten Dollar Words**

Along with reducing literacy demands and showing their interest and care, reception staff can make people with low literacy skills feel comfortable by using language that is easy to understand. Hearing "There's a four- to six-day waiting period for professional staff to assess your eligibility – but they'll only do that if you've completed these forms properly and been referred by the appropriate agency," isn't likely to make people feel at ease.

The negative tone is a problem, but so is the use of ten-dollar words. If people are nervous when using your services for the first time, it may take some time for the information they hear to sink in. If it is hidden behind complicated, fancy language, your message may not get through.

The Ottawa Centretown Community Health Centre has made a commitment to letting people feel at ease when they approach the Centre, whether or not they can read and

## Literacy Notes

Be easy to deal with:

- Take the time to explain how your agency works.
- Avoid forms, or offer people help with them.
- Use plain language.

write. The Centre hired a Waiting Room Greeter who listens to patients' problems and concerns and offers information and guidance. In addition to providing literacy assistance when it is required, the Greeter offers information on social assistance including food, shelter, and clothing.

### After the First Visit

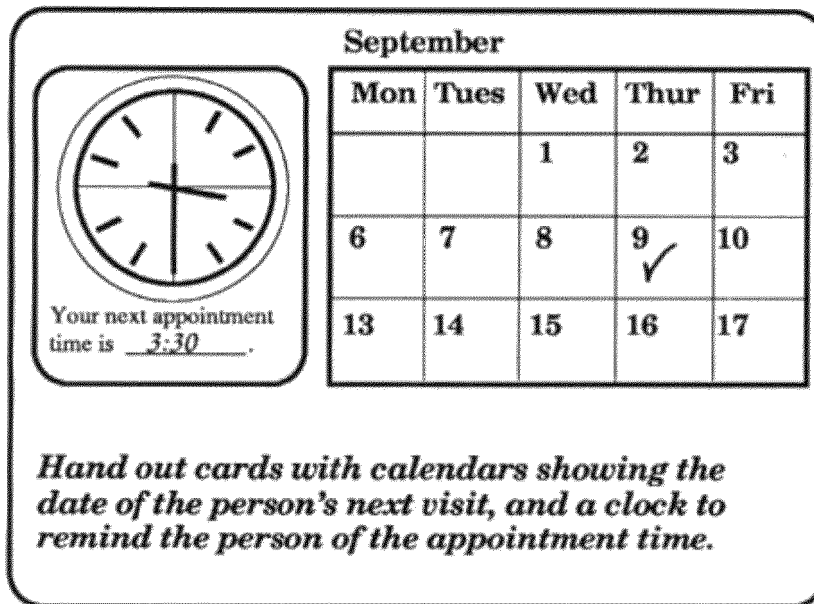
Once the necessary forms are completed and a person is registered for an organization's services, the next information received from community agencies is often a letter. If your organization has been frustrated by a low rate of response on written follow-ups, it may be because many people cannot read your letters. Your follow up could include a telephone call as an alternative or supplement to a letter. However, you may find this too time-consuming to institute for everyone who uses your services. If so, you could take note of who seemed to have trouble with your forms or other literacy demands and telephone only them.

Staff who become aware of an individual's low literacy might use a discreet colour-coded sticker on the person's file to alert

others to be sensitive to literacy concerns and use the telephone instead of letters for follow-ups. Also, if reception personnel complete the intake form for an individual, they could check a box on the form to indicate that the person appears to have low literacy skills. If you decide to do either of these things to identify people with low literacy skills, make sure the practice is not obvious. Staff must be especially careful to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. With this information, counsellors can be sure to offer the individuals alternative methods to written materials in individual program activities.

One organization issued business cards to people with low literacy skills, which they then handed to counsellors and others with whom they dealt in the agency, so that the personnel would avoid making excessive literacy demands. Clients appreciated the business-like, dignified approach of the cards.

Many things are literacy barriers. Every barrier removed improves your ability to work effectively with people who cannot read and write



well. If you issue appointment cards to people, for example, take a look at how they are worded and how they appear to you. Are they filled with small print, advice on how to reschedule appointments if necessary, with room for a handscrawled date and time? Most of this information may be important, but can it be rewritten in plain language? Could a clock design and calendar be used to show the time and date of the person's next appointment?

The key to successfully introducing procedures and methods to identify clients with poor literacy skills and deal with

their needs appropriately is personnel training. The next section of this handbook contains suggestions for sensitizing staff to people's literacy needs.

### **Alternatives to Writing**

If your organization offers group workshops, you can accommodate

## **Literacy Notes**

- Telephone people with low literacy skills instead of, or in addition to, writing them letters.
- Note discreetly on your files that the person has special literacy needs.
- Look for literacy barriers on everything you use to communicate.

participants' varying levels of reading and writing abilities by offering everyone an alternative. Instead of asking group members to write down their answers to questions, for example, people might be offered the choice of writing their responses or recording them.

When group members are to do self-directed study involving reading and some other means of information gathering, such as contacting other organizations or companies, try assigning these tasks to teams of people. One can take care of the written research, while the other does the foot work or phone work, for example. Let people in the group divide up into reporters (written task) and researchers (telephone work). Then each team member can share what he or she has learned in an oral report to the other.

If you have some leeway, try to keep reading and writing work to a minimum or offer program participants a choice of learning methods. Be sure that staff and volunteers offer these choices to all program participants. People with low or no literacy skills should not be separated out from their colleagues or placed in a designated group. Make the use of alternative methods your normal practice.

## **Literacy Notes**

In your program activities:

- Use tape recorders as well as paper.
- Offer low literacy choices to participants.
- Don't divide groups into readers and non-readers.

## **If You Know There's a Problem**

If you know that someone cannot read and write at all, ensure that your staff is ready to explain things verbally and refrain from handing the person pamphlets and sending them letters. Community health agencies have realized the dangers that can arise if people don't understand health-related information. At the Lawrence Heights Community Health Centre in Toronto, for example, doctors do not give out any written instructions unless they know the patient can read and write.

When staff give important information or instructions orally, it is helpful to ask people to summarize the information they have heard. In this way, you can be sure that you have been understood.

## **Looking for New Ideas**

Could literacy concerns be one of the subjects discussed at your agency's

## Literacy Notes

- Give verbal information to people who cannot read and write.
- Make literacy a topic for regular staff meetings.

staff meetings? Front-line personnel are the people most likely to know about clients' literacy needs and about problems stemming from information not reaching people with low literacy skills.

At the St. John Regional Hospital, a staff member's idea was the spark that led to the development of a patient video to encourage children to read. The employee contacted literacy programs for information and assistance, checked to see if the hospital's mission might relate to the project and then approached management with a proposal.

At the employee's suggestion, a special committee was established to produce a "Child Life Reading Video" for patient education TV. The video promotes the value of reading by showing a doctor, a nurse, a caretaker and two other employees reading children's stories. The child receives a message about reading and sees these professionals as warm, caring, accessible people. Both messages help the hospital achieve its mission.

Literacy has now become a real concern at the hospital. Management decided to assess the readability of all their written materials and they developed guidelines

for reading materials given to patients, for their consent form, and for any information they share with other health agencies.

The Calgary General Hospital has also used its free TV channel for patient education. A video teaches new mothers how to diaper their babies and offers information on other parenting skills. This video saves staff time and reaches people who may have low literacy skills.

## Help is Out There

Changes in the way an organization does its work can be implemented gradually. A literacy audit may discover areas that need change but different aspects of an agency's work can be addressed at different times. A literacy professional may be able to help you take a critical look at how you run your programs and how you bring people into your organization. People who use your services are also good critics, as are people who are in the process of learning to read. There is help available where there is a will to change.

## Staff Training

This handbook and its companion, *Taking Down the Wall of Words: Community Agencies and Literacy*, can provide your staff with basic information about illiteracy and how it might affect their work. The resource list at the end of this book may also be helpful if you would like to have some more in-depth knowledge of the issue. But to make literacy awareness and sensitivity part of your agency's everyday work, you may need specialized information that relates directly to the services you provide.

Literacy organizations – networks, training programs and other local, national and provincial organizations – are rich information resources. A visit to your agency by a literacy expert can be an excellent opportunity for you to:

- assess your policies, programs and processes for their “literacy quotient”;
- learn about literacy and literacy training programs;
- discover how your organization can identify people with poor literacy skills, and
- share your specialized knowledge of the people who use your services with a member of the literacy community.

## Raising Awareness

If a literacy professional can spend some time with your organization, you may want to do a “walk around” to explain how the agency works and to describe the services it provides and the people who typically use them. He or she may be able to offer some advice on how you can make your practices more accessible to people with low literacy skills.

With the information from your agency tour, the literacy worker can speak with your staff and volunteers about the practical realities of their work. They can be guided to identify people who may be avoiding literacy tasks and who may benefit from literacy upgrading programs. Organizations that have provided literacy awareness training to their staff and volunteers have found afterwards that the workers refer increasing numbers of clients who don't read and write well to literacy programs. The next section of this book provides guidelines on the referral process.

During the literacy information session, staff and volunteers can also discuss the benefits of removing literacy barriers, using plain language in all their communication and making literacy an ongoing concern. Such a session can be an information-sharing opportunity. The expertise you have about the

people who use your services can be useful to a literacy worker. If some of the people you serve every day could benefit from literacy upgrading programs, your information may help the literacy expert develop strategies to encourage them to enrol in a program.

Your staff and volunteers can learn about the different kinds of literacy programs available in your community: One-on-one training, small group sessions and classroom courses, teaching methods that relate directly to the learner's lifestyle, experiences and needs, computer-based courses and courses in English or French as a second language.

An innovative approach that has been used successfully to sensitize people to the realities of life with low literacy skills is to ask them to decipher a new language. In workshops, people are invited to try and read words and phrases written in a language they don't know. The challenge of having to deal with familiar and new situations without the help of the written word helps participants appreciate the many contexts in which literacy demands raise barriers to understanding. It also helps them understand the strategies necessary to deal with everyday events without reading and writing skills.

## **Train the Trainers**

You may wish to have one or several staff members trained as resident specialists in literacy and plain language writing. These specialists would then be able to assist other employees in developing literacy -

sensitive work methods. They may also be the people who discuss literacy-upgrading programs with clients who might benefit from them.

Your in-house literacy specialist could have more extensive training to identify people with low literacy skills, to know the types of literacy programs available and the nature of the illiteracy problem in your community, and to learn the methods of plain language writing. While it may be difficult for one person to become an "expert" in so many different areas, it is realistic for someone to become knowledgeable enough so that he or she can identify sources of help. This person might find out who in the community can rewrite some of your materials in plain language, for example. The individual need not be able to do all the literacy work for your agency.

Ask a local literacy program if your future specialist could enrol in a training program for volunteer literacy teachers. The information about literacy and the training process that can be gained from such a brief session can be invaluable. The individual might also spend some time with literacy experts, learners and plain language writing specialists.

Once the resident specialist has received sufficient training, he or she can become your agency's resource person on written materials, literacy-sensitive practices and the referral of people who want to improve their reading and writing skills to literacy-upgrading programs.



## **Orientation**

New employees who receive orientation sessions dealing with the needs of your client group and your agency's programs and practices will also need a session on literacy awareness. Such a session can be offered by your in-house expert or by a literacy professional. As your staff and volunteers become accustomed to working in ways that lower literacy barriers, they will be able to reinforce this literacy awareness on a day-to-day basis.

## **That's My Job**

Part of the process of raising the awareness of staff and volunteers and changing your work methods to improve accessibility can be to have everyone review their job description to look for literacy-related activities. Almost any job in a community agency can involve tasks that relate to clients' literacy needs. Anyone who deals with the public or with documents given to clients and consumers may need to improve their literacy quotient.

## **Receptionist**

As the first person people meet, the receptionist represents an agency to the people who use its services. The receptionist's job description might call upon the individual to deal courteously with all clients and consumers, to explain programs and procedures in plain language, to assist people with forms and to be sensitive to people's special needs, including literacy assistance.

## **Counsellors**

Literacy awareness is probably only an extension of counsellors' established approach of dealing with clients and consumers in a holistic way. Job descriptions might include the need to inform clients about literacy programs when and if the counsellor deems it appropriate, to refer clients to such programs and to follow-up in order to determine whether the program meets the person's needs.

## **Executive Director**

The Executive Director is the critical link between the Board of Directors and the work done by agency staff and volunteers. A commitment to literacy by the organization's top manager is essential to achieve continuing success with initiatives started by a literacy audit. As the person responsible for carrying out the organization's mission, the Executive Director can incorporate literacy concerns into every aspect of its work. And he or she can ensure that the organization establishes and maintains contacts with literacy organizations and other community agencies with common goals. The section of this handbook dealing with "Shared Concerns, Common Goals," gives some suggestions on how these exchanges can be fostered.

## **The Legacy**

By investing in training to help employees deal with literacy concerns, an organization can ensure that literacy is not forgotten once the literacy audit is completed and

some forms and brochures have been revised. The imagination and dedication of staff and volunteers will help the agency to respond to its

clients' ever-changing needs and its own changing requirements. Your agency's workers, as always, will be its most important resource.

## **New Skills, Better Skills Referring People to Literacy-Upgrading Programs**

Word-of-mouth has been found to be the number one way in which people find out about literacy programs. Expensive advertising and other promotional methods are useful too but it is contact with someone they know and trust that usually inspires people who want to improve their literacy skills to do so.

A recent study asked 106 literacy students in two provinces to name the various ways in which they heard about the upgrading programs they were taking. Sixty-nine per cent said that they had heard through word-of-mouth: 46 per cent from someone they knew and 23 per cent from a helping professional. Another 17 per cent mentioned television and radio.

Neighbourhood houses, community centres and drop-in centres are ideal places to recruit people into literacy programs. A tutor in Montreal recruited a lot of young people in the city's east-end parks. On their own turf, people are more receptive to information about services they may be interested in using. They can feel at ease and comfortable talking to someone they know and trust.

### **Messages From People Who Care**

Your agency may be a place where people feel at ease. Perhaps the people who use your services do so regularly and come to know and trust the counsellors and other staff. If so, those who might be interested in taking literacy upgrading courses might also be receptive to information about them from your staff and volunteers. Or you may want to bring people in to inform your clients and consumers about literacy programs.

Literacy students who are happy with their upgrading programs are the best recruiters for these programs. They can explain how the programs work and that they are flexible and personalized. They can also relate their personal experiences with improving their literacy skills. A message about improving one's skills may be a lot more palatable coming from a peer than from someone who seems more like a school teacher or a boss. People want information, not pressure.

People who are following literacy-upgrading programs have said that they appreciated being approached about improving their skills by someone with whom they already

## Literacy Notes

The best recruiters for literacy upgrading programs are:

- people enrolled in the programs;
- professionals who are known and trusted;
- friends.

had a relationship of trust. In Calgary, a John Howard Society life skills worker encouraged caseworkers to review clients' course logs during counselling sessions. In this way, the caseworkers learned more about their clients' daily challenges and were able to help them better express themselves.

By taking opportunities like this to learn about clients' literacy skills, workers can feel more comfortable suggesting upgrading programs. How the suggestion is brought up is important. The words "illiterate" and "illiteracy" need never enter the conversation. Most people are not illiterate. They have some reading and writing skills, but may need and want to improve them.

### Improving One's Skills

It is easier for most people to agree that they have a reading problem than to admit that they are unable to read, even if that seems to be the case. They are more comfortable with the idea of "literacy-upgrading programs" instead of "literacy programs." And some people don't want to hear about anything that sounds like school or education.

They may feel that they were failed by the

educational system and not want to go back. Literacy upgrading programs are often nothing like their early school experiences. Different methods are used to teach adults to read and write.

### 1,001 Excuses

Fear and embarrassment can make people put up walls to block out a suggestion to enrol in a literacy program. Beneath the denials and excuses, you can hear some of the reasons why people really don't want to take

### "I don't have a problem."

When people say, "I don't have a problem. I just don't bother." they may be embarrassed to admit that not being able to read and write well limits the person's life in ways that are troublesome.

- Tell the person that you know many people who have trouble reading and writing. The person is not alone.
- Point out that other adults take courses to improve their skills. Talk about how

learning to read and write is wonderful. Mention some people you know who have taken courses – Paul, Claudette...

- Stress that it is never too late, that anyone can learn, at any age.

### **“I get along all right”**

When people say, “I’ve gotten along just fine up to now,” they may be uncomfortable talking about the subject and want to get away from you and the idea of tackling the problem at long last.

- Recognize that the person has done really well in getting around the problem. Ask how the person has done it.
- Mention that there are lots of different kinds of courses around. People can learn on their own if they want, or they can work with a small group of people. And literacy courses deal with subjects that are really interesting.
- Ask if there are any times when not reading and writing well is a real problem. Suggest that the person could learn to read and write just for that reason.

### **“I’ll never go back”**

When people say, “You’ll never get me back into a school,” you can be sure that the person remembers school and that the memories are not good.

- Talk about those memories. Ask what schools the person went to and what happened there. What are the person’s fears?

- Explain that things are different for adults learning to read and write. It’s all very relaxed. They treat people like adults. You have a say in what you learn.

### **“It’s too late”**

When people say, “I’m too old to go to school,” it is important to deal with their concern.

- Give examples of other people the person’s age who have taken literacy courses.
- Get the person to talk about goals, plans, dreams and the things the person could do if reading and writing weren’t such a problem.
- Point out how the person’s life, perhaps their retirement years, would be even better.
- Find out whether the person has recently learned something new. Talk about that experience. Find out if the person enjoyed it.
- Invite the person to try, to take a chance.

### **A Program for Every Need**

Across Canada, there is a plethora of literacy-upgrading programs. One-on-one literacy training, often offered by volunteers, has a long history of success. Community based training programs seek to make people comfortable with their learning experience by making it as

relevant and close to their everyday lives as possible. The “Life Experience” approach to literacy training, for example, uses the student’s own experiences as the subjects of stories and journals. Everything the student learns is relevant to his or her life. High Schools and Community Colleges also offer literacy upgrading and, in Quebec, the School Board network offers extensive programming throughout the province.

In Sanikiluaq, Northwest Territories, a literacy-upgrading program was designed to teach English and Inuktitut by researching and writing Inuit educational materials and literature. Teams of learners and tutors interviewed elders to learn community stories and legends. They collected information about traditional medicine, eider-duck parka-making, kayak-building, traditional family life and hunting.

In the process of putting all this material together for publication, the participants learned and developed literacy skills.

A literacy network can tell you about the various types of programs available in your area. The provincial and national networks are listed at the end of this handbook. Literacy professionals can help you and a prospective student decide on the appropriate type of course for the person and can assist with the initial contact with a program.

## **The Signs of Low Literacy**

You have probably dealt with some people whom you thought might be having difficulty reading and writing. It is often hard to be sure, especially if you only deal with an individual once or twice. The literacy notes on this page list a

## **Literacy Notes**

### **Someone with poor reading and writing skills may:**

Avoid reading and writing tasks by:

- writing illegibly;
- not volunteering for any activities involving reading and writing;
- offering excuses for not completing forms or written tasks;

Seem less capable when having to rely on written information:

- have difficulty doing things based on written directions;
- ask to have information repeated verbally;
- watch what other people do before starting a task;
- speak up often, but be unable to follow up with written documentation when requested.

number of indicators that can alert you to watch for other signs of low literacy.

## **Help Take Down the Walls**

The idea that they need to improve their reading and writing skills may be difficult for some people to face. The information-based society around them has often

blamed them for their low literacy and put up literacy barriers to keep them from participating fully as citizens and consumers. But most people whose skills need improvement want to do something about them. You may be able to provide the caring support and information they need to take the first step toward literacy.

## **Shared Concerns, Common Goals**

### **How Community Agencies Can Work Together for Literacy**

Low literacy is linked to many social, health, community and economic problems. Some communities have recognized the relationship between literacy and the other concerns addressed by various agencies. They are creating councils, committees and projects, bringing together all the organizations concerned with social issues, to develop joint approaches to improving literacy levels in their communities.

### **Illiteracy is A Social and Economic Problem**

Coordinating committees are effective ways for organizations to share information and expertise, avoid duplicating services and achieve a better understanding of a social problem. If there is no literacy committee in your community, you may want to approach a literacy organization to get help in establishing one. Or you may want to bring the issue of illiteracy to the table in committees of which your organization is already a member. As a social and economic problem, illiteracy is linked to many of the issues that concern your agency and others in your community. The human side of illiteracy is often cited

in public service messages and in information from community and government agencies. We hear about the personal cost of low literacy, as it limits people's lives and their ability to earn a living or teach their children. Our awareness of the effects of low literacy is now being expanded, however, to include the economic cost to our communities, provinces and the nation as a whole. Illiteracy affects our ability to compete internationally with the highly skilled population of Japan, for example, where illiteracy is almost unknown. If Canada cannot compete, we may lose jobs and our standard of living may fall.

### **Coordinated Action**

The New Brunswick Committee on Literacy was established to help improve the reading and writing skills of the 44 per cent of the province's population who have inadequate literacy skills. It brings together representatives of the federal and provincial governments, business, labour, Read Canada, education and the voluntary and community sectors, to encourage understanding and action on the problem of illiteracy in the province.



The Committee has developed information kits, produced an orientation film on literacy and held Community Round Tables to discuss literacy.

The round table discussions, held on International Literacy Day, September 8, put forward a number of suggestions for action on illiteracy. They suggested that unions and management of companies in the area should work to find joint solutions to workers' low literacy. They supported the idea of workplace initiatives and Employee Assistance Programs. They advocated the development of readable materials by all participants and agreed that all their goals should have a realistic, long-term horizon.

In Calgary, the Adult Literacy Awareness Project was established with funding from the National Literacy Secretariat of the federal Department of Multiculturalism and Citizenship. Its steering committee includes representatives from the United Way, Alberta Family and Social Services, Alberta Vocational College, the Calgary Board of Education, the Canadian Mental Health Association, the Centre for Income Security and Employment and the YMCA Canada. The project set up the Calgary Literacy Line, to help low literate adults access literacy programs. It is also informing community agencies, businesses and unions about the problem of and solutions to illiteracy and has increased information-sharing among literacy and social agencies.

## **Literacy and Other Issues**

Community agencies are increasingly concerned with complex challenges such as family violence, child poverty, youth at risk and support for single parents, which require responses from a number of organizations. Some have developed formal integrating mechanisms to coordinate the agencies' policies. Inter-agency committees and forums may undertake a number of functions including the development of programs, policies and service protocols. Literacy training may be a key component in a mix of programs designed to address agencies' common concerns. As a community agency involved in such inter-agency work, you can encourage your colleagues to consider the place of literacy in the development of your policy response. A literacy agency can provide useful advice on the contribution your committee or forum can make.

The Social Planning Council of Ottawa-Carleton has included illiteracy as one of the issues addressed by its Health Issues Forum. The Forum coordinates the efforts of organizations concerned with issues related to health, including illiteracy, homelessness, poverty, violence, pollution and AIDS. Their membership includes:

- representatives from the anglophone and francophone populations;
- groups representing women, aboriginal peoples, ethnic and visible minorities, people with disabilities and those receiving social assistance;

- health service agencies and governments, and
- community groups.

The Forum's members believe that solutions to the problems it wants to address require collaboration, cooperation and dialogue amongst decision-makers in all of these organizations. They encourage members of the public to join in discussions of the region's health needs; they advocate for healthy social policy; and, they function as a resource and reference group for the voluntary sector.

There are many coordinating committees in Canadian communities that bring governments, businesses, unions and social and voluntary agencies together to address common concerns. When illiteracy is seen as one of a complex of problems faced by people in a community, it is more easily linked to the activities of committees and groups concerned with crime, health, poverty and independent living, for example. If illiteracy is left out of the solution equations for other issues, opportunities for innovative approaches are lost.

## For More Information...

### Resource List & Bibliography

There are many excellent books and sources of information about literacy and more are being produced all the time. This is a partial list of materials available as of early 1991. A literacy network in your area may be able to suggest further reading on these and other subjects related to literacy:

#### Adult Illiteracy

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Philippi, Jones S. "Matching Literacy to Job Training: Some Applications from Military Programs." *Journal of Reading*, Vol. 31, pp. 658-666.

### **Children and Youth**

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- Cato, Jeremy. "SFU Prof Claims Illiteracy a Socio-Cultural Crisis." *Education Leader*. Vol. 2, No. 1.
- Fagan, William T. "Literacy in Canada: A Critique of the Southam Report." *Alberta Journal of Educational Research*. Vol. 34, No. 3, pp. 224-23 1.
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Paul, Marianne. *When Words are Bars*. Kitchener: Core Literacy, 1991.

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## Literacy Coalitions and Networks

All Canadian provinces and territories and many cities, have literacy coalitions and networks. These organizations can let you know about the range of literacy-training options available in your area. They may also be able to give you a hand informing your workers and volunteers about literacy and about making your services accessible to people who don't read and write well.

For up-to-date listings of literacy agencies in your province and community, refer to the National Adult Literacy Database (NALD) web site at **<http://www.nald.ca>**

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This handbook is for managers and program directors in community agencies who want to know how to make literacy awareness part of their everyday work. It contains information on:

- writing materials in clear language,
- tips to make programs more accessible to people with low literacy skills,
- developing and sharing literacy resources in the community,
- more sources of information on literacy.