

National Center for Training, Support, and Technical Assistance (NCTSTA)



Health Communication in Action

A Toolkit for Public Health Service Providers

This Health Equity Service Provider Toolkit is a creative interactive PDF! We invite you to click on the graphs, images, resources, and text to go directly to the source for additional information. This toolkit is a living document that aims to support health care providers in their efforts to identify and address health disparities in their communities.

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Health Communication At-a-Glance:

Health communication is the science and art of using communication to advance the health and well-being of people and populations.



Health communication is the practice of using communication strategies and techniques to inform and influence individuals, groups, and communities about health issues. It involves the creation and dissemination of health messages through various channels, including media, interpersonal communication, and social networks ([Health Communication Strategies the Community Guide, n.d.](#))

As a component of public health, health communication helps to promote health, prevent disease, and improve healthcare outcomes. Effective health communication can increase knowledge and awareness and knowledge of health issues, change attitudes and behaviors, and encourage individuals to take action to protect their health and the health of their communities.

The CDC has identified health communication as a key strategy for improving health outcomes. Service providers are encouraged to review the [CDC's Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication](#), a living document that is updated as language and cultural norms change ([CDC, 2021](#)).



CDC'S Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication

CDC's Health Equity Guiding Principles for Inclusive Communication are intended to help public health professionals ensure their communication work, including communication of public health science, meets the specific needs and priorities of the populations they serve and addresses all people inclusively, accurately, and respectfully. These principles are designed to adapt and change as both language and cultural norms change.

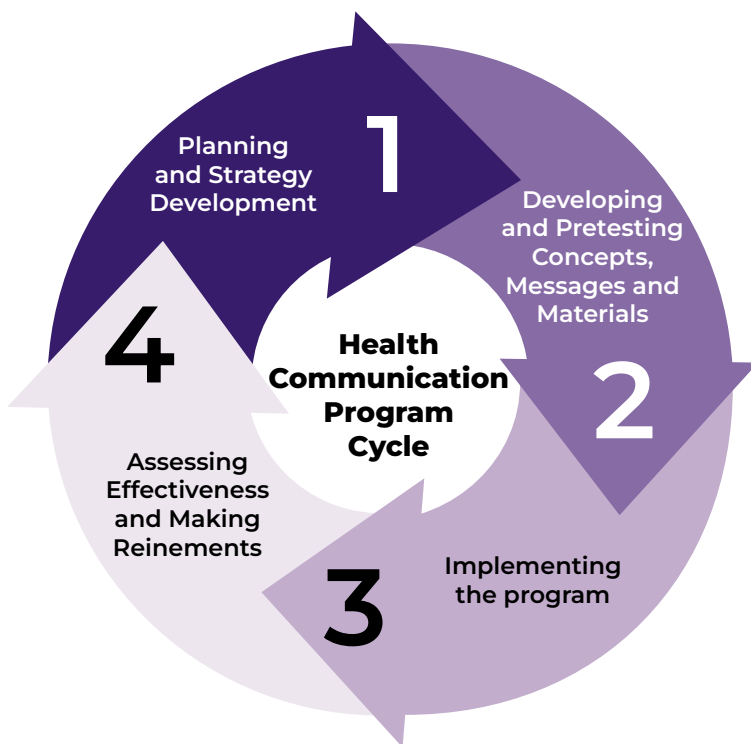
Why do words matter for health equity?

Language in communication products should reflect and speak to the needs of people in the audience of focus, using non-stigmatizing language. This means:

- Using a health equity lens when framing information about health disparities
- Using person-first language and avoiding unintentional blaming
- Using preferred terms for select population groups while recognizing that there isn't always agreement on these terms
- Considering how communications are developed and looking for ways to develop more inclusive health communications products
- Exploring other resources and references related to health equity communications.

The Health Communication Process:

An effective communication program requires an understanding of the needs and perceptions of the intended audience. As outlined in [Making Health Communication Programs Work](#), health communications planning and development encompasses four stages: (1) Planning and Strategy Development; (2) Developing and Pretesting Concepts, Messages, and (3) Materials; Implementing the Program; and (4) Assessing Effectiveness and Making Refinements.



Source: [National Institutes of Health National Cancer Institute](#)

Stage 1: Planning and Strategy Development

- Identify how your organization can use communication effectively to address a health problem.
- Identify intended audience
 - See: [Understand Your Audience](#)
- Use consumer research to create a communication strategy and objectives.
- Draft communication plans, including activities, partnerships, and baseline surveys for outcome evaluation.
 - For help with planning and strategy development, refer to the [Field Guide to Designing a Health Communication Strategy](#).

Stage 2: Developing and Pretesting Concepts, Messages, and Materials

- Develop relevant, meaningful messages.
 - See: [Message Mapping Worksheet](#) or the online [Message Mapping Guide](#)
- Plan activities and draft materials.
- Pretest the messages and materials with intended audience members.
 - See: [“How to Conduct Effective Pretests”](#) developed by AIDSCAP Behavior Change Communication (BCC) unit.



Remember:

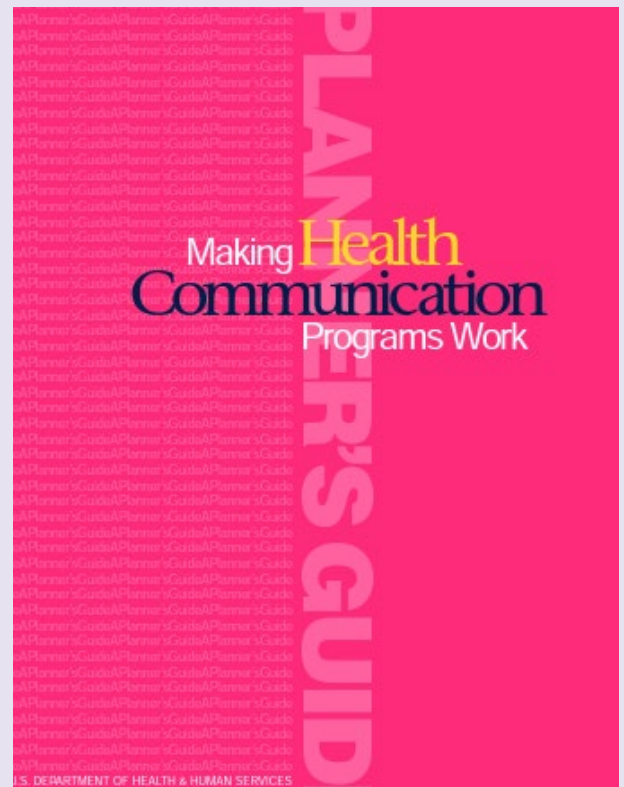
Program planning, implementation, and evaluation are recurring processes that are likely to be revisited throughout the program's life until desired results are achieved or the program has run its' course.

Stage 3: Implementing the Program

- Begin program implementation, maintain promotion, distribution, and other activities through all channels (*i.e., social media, the internet, television, radio, smartphones, billboards, and newsletters*).
- Track intended-audience exposure and reaction to the program and determine whether adjustments are needed (process evaluation).
- Periodically review all program components and make revisions as necessary.

Stage 4: Assessing Effectiveness and Making Refinements

- Assess your health communication program.
- Identify refinements that can increase the reach and effectiveness of health communications.



For more information on these steps, refer to the National Cancer Institute's [Pink Book](#).

Health Communication Strategies

Using a Health Equity Lens in Communication

Using a health equity lens in health communication means intentionally looking at the potential positive and negative impacts of proposed messages. Using a health equity lens in communication planning, development, and dissemination means being inclusive, avoiding biased and stigmatizing language and images, and requesting input from the intended audience in all phases of communications development.

When framing health disparities in communications and discussing its' public health implications, long-standing systemic, social, and health inequities that have been introduced or exacerbated by federal, state, and local policies should be highlighted and addressed ([CDC, 2022](#)).

[Learn more about how to frame Health Equity in communications](#)

Persuasion in Health Communication:

While most health communication campaigns seek to persuade audiences to think, feel, or behave in a certain way, it is important for those creating messaging and/or campaigns as part of health initiatives to consider the following:

The source of a message can be a single person, groups, or institutions.

Perceived credibility of the source will impact how an audience perceives the message.

Dimensions of perceived source credibility include:

- Perceived competence (expertise)
- Perceived trustworthiness (reputation)
- Perceived goodwill (intentions)

Of these three dimensions, perceived competence is the most important dimension for credibility judgments.

More credible sources are typically considered more persuasive.

NCTSTA Webinar Highlight:

Effective Communication Strategies to Address Emerging Health Threats



Yonaira M. Rivera, PhD, MPH
Assistant Professor of Communication
School of Communication & Information, Rutgers University

Health Literacy

Health Literacy refers to the ability of individuals to accurately receive and interpret health information provided in verbal and written communication that matches their literacy level. The definition of health literacy was updated in August 2023 with the release of [Healthy People 2030 \(CDC, 2023\)](#).

Key Definitions:

Personal Health Literacy refers to the degree in which individuals can find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.

Organizational Health Literacy refers to the degree to which organizations equitably enable individuals to find, understand, and use information and services to inform health-related decisions and actions for themselves and others.

The Impact of Health Literacy on Individual Health

Health Literacy allows individuals to be active participants in their health and wellness journey. It allows individuals to:

Understand Health Information: To comprehend health-related information, such as medical instructions, preventive measures, and treatment options. Without adequate health literacy, people may struggle to understand important health concepts, leading to potential misunderstandings and, or misinterpretations.

Access Health Services: Health literacy plays a vital role in accessing healthcare services

effectively. Understanding how to navigate the healthcare system, find appropriate providers, and access essential resources are all critical to maintaining good health.

Engage in Preventive Measures: People with higher health literacy are more likely to engage in preventive behaviors and adopt healthier lifestyles. They can better understand the importance of vaccinations, screenings, and healthy habits like proper nutrition and exercise.

Make Informed Decisions: Informed decision-making is essential for managing health conditions and choosing appropriate treatments. Individuals with higher health literacy can assess risks and benefits, understand potential side effects, and actively participate in shared decision-making with healthcare providers.

Recognize Health Risks: Health literacy enables individuals to recognize potential health risks and take appropriate action to address them. Being aware of warning signs and understanding symptoms can lead to early detection and timely intervention.

Manage Chronic Conditions: For individuals living with chronic conditions, health literacy is critical for understanding their condition, adhering to treatment plans, and managing their health effectively on a day-to-day basis.

Reduce Health Disparities: Improving health literacy can help reduce health disparities. People with lower health literacy levels may face challenges in accessing healthcare, understanding medical advice, and making informed choices, leading to worse health outcomes.



DID YOU KNOW...

1. Nearly **9 out of 10 adults** struggle to understand and use personal and public health information when it's filled with unfamiliar or complex terms.
2. Choosing to use jargon is an act of exclusion. Using clear communication advances health equity.
3. Clear communication builds trust with your audience. When your audience trusts you, they're more likely to follow your recommendations.
4. Improving health literacy could [prevent nearly 1 million hospital visits](#) and save over \$25 billion a year ([CDC, 2023](#)).

Advocate for Health Literate Organizations

These points can be used to build a case as to why organizations should adopt health literacy best practices when seeking buy-in from staff, senior leadership, or community leaders as they support why health professionals and healthcare organizations need to adopt health literacy best practices.



Health Literacy Best Practices:

Health Literacy has one aim: to communicate health information in a clear, understandable, and culturally appropriate manner that ensures that all individuals, regardless of their literacy levels or backgrounds, can access and comprehend essential health information. Health literacy best practices include:

- [Develop and test materials](#) that communicate health information and services to specific populations/audiences.
- Consider [the cultural and linguistic norms](#), environment, and history of your intended audience when developing your information and messages.
- Use [certified translators and interpreters](#) who can adapt to your intended audience's language preferences, communication expectations, and health literacy skills.
- Work with trusted messengers to share health information. Key messengers may include community-based partners, civic groups, community health workers or promotores, elected officials, medical professionals, or media influencers.
- [Collaborate](#) across sectors and organizations to make health information and services understandable and usable by the intended audiences.



Health Literacy Online:

A Guide for Simplifying the User Experience

This research-based guide will help you develop intuitive health websites and digital tools that can be easily accessed and understood by all users, including the millions of Americans who struggle to find, process, and use online health information. (Source: OASH, 2016)



OASH

Office of
Climate Change
and Health Equity

Click on the links below to be directed to resources from various community sectors that are committed to building health-literate communities.



Health Care Providers

A community's gateway to many health services.



Libraries

Health information and literacy services for patrons through a variety of methods.



Early Childhood & Schools

Building health literacy skills to help children lead healthier lives.

(Source: CDC, 2023)

Section 1. What We Know About Users with Limited Literacy Skills.

Section 2. Write Actionable Content.

Section 3. Display Content on the Page.

Section 4. Organize Content and Simplify Navigation.

Section 5. Engage Users

Section 6. Test Your Site with Users with Limited Literacy Skills

Health Literacy Online Strategies Checklist

(Source: OASH, 2016)

National Standards for Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services (CLAS) in Health and Health Care

The National CLAS standards are intended to advance health equity, improve quality, and help eliminate health care disparities by establishing guidance for healthcare organizations to implement culturally and linguistically appropriate services.

There are 15 standards - a principal standard and 14 other standards in three focal areas: Governance, Leadership, and Workforce (standards 2-4), Communication and Language Assistance (standards 5-8), and Engagement, Continuous Improvement, and Accountability (standards 9-15) (Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services, [n.d.](#)).

Principal Standard:

Provide effective, equitable, understandable, and respectful quality care and services that are responsive to diverse cultural health beliefs and practices, preferred languages, health literacy, and other communication needs.

Standards 2-4:

- Advance and sustain organizational governance and leadership that promotes CLAS and health equity through policy, practices, and allocated resources.
- Recruit, promote, and support a

culturally and linguistically diverse governance, leadership, and workforce that are responsive to the population in the service area.

- Educate and train governance, leadership, and workforce in culturally and linguistically appropriate policies and practices on an ongoing basis.

Standards 5-8:

- Offer language assistance to individuals who have limited English proficiency and/or other communication needs, at no cost to them, to facilitate timely access to all health care and services.
- Inform all individuals of the availability of language assistance services clearly and in their preferred language, verbally and in writing.
- Ensure the competence of individuals providing language assistance, recognizing that the use of untrained individuals and/or minors as interpreters should be avoided.
- Provide easy-to-understand print and multimedia materials and signage in the languages commonly used by the populations in the service area.

Standards 9-15:

- Establish culturally and linguistically appropriate goals, policies, and management accountability, and infuse them throughout the organization's planning and operations.
- Conduct ongoing assessments of the organization's CLAS-related activities and integrate CLAS-related measures into measurement and continuous quality improvement activities.
- Collect and maintain accurate and reliable demographic data to monitor and evaluate the impact of CLAS on health equity and outcomes and to inform service delivery.
- Conduct regular assessments of community health assets and needs and use the results to plan and implement services that respond to the cultural and linguistic diversity of populations in the service area.
- Partner with the community to design, implement, and evaluate policies, practices, and services to ensure cultural and linguistic appropriateness.
- Create conflict and grievance resolution processes that are culturally and linguistically appropriate to identify, prevent, and resolve conflicts or complaints.
- Communicate the organization's progress in implementing and sustaining CLAS to all stakeholders, constituents, and the general public ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health, n.d.](#)).

Learn more about the CLAS standards by watching NCTSTAs [“Implementing the National CLAS Standards to Reduce Health Disparities” Webinar Recording](#).

Menu of Strategies

- Community engagement,
- partnerships development,
- **operationalizing the adoption of the national standards for culturally and linguistically appropriate services (CLAS),**
- enhancing health literacy,
- access to innovative models of care, and
- continuous quality improvement and evaluation.



CLAS: Principal Standard and Themes

The Principal Standard

Provide effective, equitable, understandable, and respectful quality care and services that are responsive to diverse cultural health beliefs and practices, preferred languages, health literacy, and other communication needs.

Theme 1: Governance, Leadership, and Workforce

Theme 2: Communication and Language Assistance

Theme 3: Engagement, Continuous Improvement, and Accountability



Related Resources:

[An Implementation Checklist for the National CLAS Standards](#): Includes a CLAS Action Worksheet and CLAS Testimonials

View the National CLAS Standards in [other languages here](#).

Visit <https://www.ThinkCulturalHealth.hhs.gov> for CLAS resources, including The Blueprint, e-learning programs, a resource library, and much more.

Health Communication in Action:

Health communication campaigns and messages have helped to increase knowledge and awareness about health issues, such as the importance of vaccination, healthy eating, and physical activity. These campaigns have been used to:

- **Increase awareness**, leading to behavior change and improved health outcomes.
- **Create behavioral change** such as smoking cessation or wearing a seatbelt. Effective health communication campaigns use targeted messaging tailored to specific populations to encourage behavioral change.
- **Improve healthcare access and utilization** by encouraging utilization of preventive services, such as cancer screenings and immunizations.
- **Enhance community engagement** that can lead to increased support and participation in health programs and policies.
- **Strengthen emergency preparedness** which is critical during emergencies (*i.e., natural disasters or disease outbreaks*). Effective communication can help to prevent the spread of disease and provide important information to the public.



Health Communication Campaigns

Health communication campaigns that focus on reducing stigma around certain health conditions can help create more inclusive and supportive environments, fostering equitable access to healthcare and support services.

The following are campaigns from CDC programs intended to reach a specific audience. These campaigns highlight best practices in communications/messaging development that have been described in this toolkit, and can serve as a model for community based organizations to develop their own campaigns.

Campaign 1



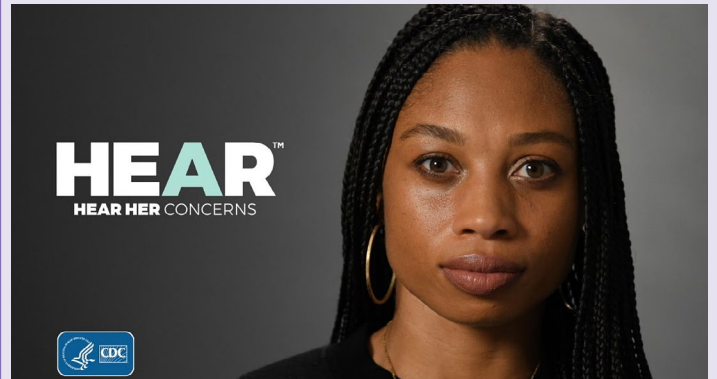
CDC's **Still Going Strong campaign** speaks directly to adults age 65 and older, and their caregivers. Its' purpose is to raise awareness about preventable injuries among older adults. This campaign has two goals:

This campaign has two goals:

- Educate older adults about common risk factors for falls and motor vehicle crashes, as well as traumatic brain injuries that can result from falls and motor vehicle crashes.
- Empower older adults and their caregivers to take simple steps that will help them maintain their independence without injury.

[Learn More](#)

Campaign 2



CDC's **Hear Her campaign** seeks to raise awareness of urgent maternal warning signs during and after pregnancy, and improve communication between patients and their healthcare providers.

The campaigns audiences include:

- People who are pregnant, people who have given birth within the last year (postpartum), and their support network (including partners, family, and friends.)
- Healthcare professionals that interact with pregnant or postpartum people.

[Learn More](#)

Campaign 3



CDC's *Let's Stop HIV Together (Together) campaign* is the national campaign of the [Ending the HIV Epidemic in the U.S. \(EHE\)](#) initiative and the [National HIV/AIDS Strategy](#). Together is an evidence-based campaign created in English and Spanish.

It aims to empower communities, partners, and health care providers to reduce HIV [stigma](#) and promote HIV [testing](#), [prevention](#), and [treatment](#).

[Learn More](#)

Campaign 4



The [National Diabetes Prevention Program](#) (National DPP) used real-life stories of participants in the program who took charge of their health and turned their type 2 diabetes risk around. Their videos show how participants overcame challenges and celebrated successes with the support of their trained Lifestyle Coach and other participants.

[Learn More](#)

Health Communication Videos Created by Community-based Organizations

To Share or Not to Share. Lies Are Contagious

[Proceed Inc. NCTSTA](#)

[PODER en SALUD](#) | Elizabeth, NJ



PROCEED Inc., NCTSTA created, **“To Share or Not to Share. Lies Are Contagious”**, a misinformation video developed as a part of the PODER en SALUD (Power in Health) national COVID-19 and Latinos/Latinx project. This 5-minute video discusses the prevalence of COVID-19 and other health misinformation shared on platforms Latinx users are known to engage with. It offers guidance on how to identify and properly respond to misinformation online so that people can help slow the spread of disinformation in their community.

[Click here to view video in Spanish.](#)

This video was developed as a part of the PODER en SALUD (Power in Health) national COVID-19 and Latinos/Latinx project.

To learn more about PODER en SALUD, visit www.poderensalud.org/

My Health is My Power

[PODER en SALUD](#)

[El Centro Inc.](#) | Kansas City, KS



PODER en SALUD's Core Partner, El Centro created this culturally tailored video aims to normalize mental health conversations within among the Latino community and promotes seeking help for challenges commonly experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as loss of a loved one, isolation, anxiety, depression, and more.

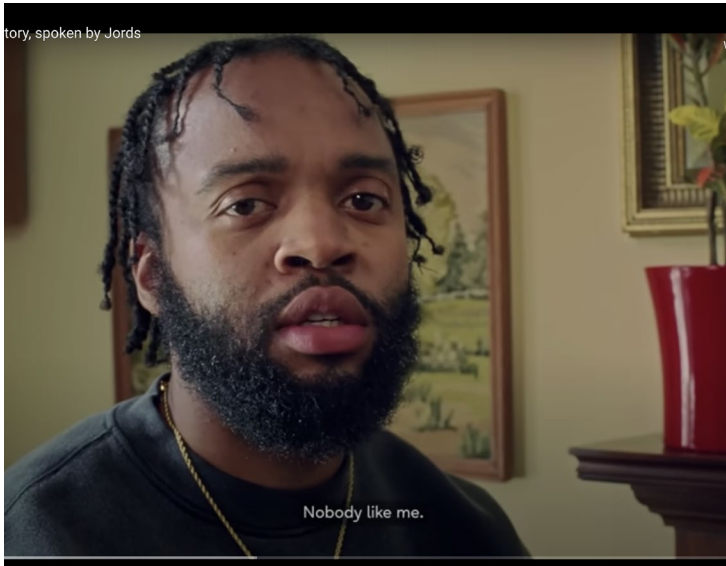
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[Watch the video here](#)

Health Communication Campaigns Created by Community-based Organizations

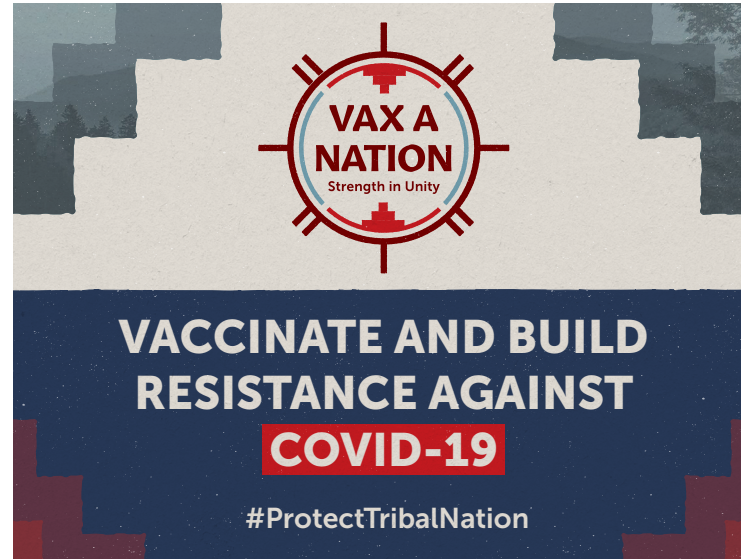
[If this speaks to you, speak to Mind Mind](#) | Wales and England



Mental health charity, **Mind**, acknowledges the feelings of isolation and being misunderstood many can relate to in their campaign 'If this speaks to you, speak to Mind'.

The campaign features four short films in which poets Jords, Lola, James, and Adaith share the stories of Rohan, Haleem, Mel, and Gethin through spoken word. The goal of the campaign is to show how different people tell the story of their experiences and how everyone experiences mental health issues differently.

[Vax-a-nation Vaccine | United South and Eastern Tribes](#) | Nashville, TN



During the pandemic, public health professionals needed to consider COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy among Native populations due to the history of genocide and medical experimentation native and indigenous people have been subjected to. The Vax-a-nation campaign “demonstrates the importance of fully understanding your audience’s distinct characteristics while also tailoring messages to align with their personal values. Using social marketing as a tool for health behavior change has proved to be an innovative approach for health promotion and public health practices” ([Seneres, 2023](#)).

[Cal Fresh Healthy Living](#) | California, USA



The goal of this campaign was to break through food marketing messages and deliver science-based eating facts that would create a meaningful difference over time. The campaign addresses food costs, access to healthier foods, knowledge of healthy foods, and other barriers that keep Californians from maintaining a healthy lifestyle.

The campaign was a collaboration between Rescue Agency and the California Department of Public Health with support from the California Department of Social Services, the University of California CalFresh Extension, the Catholic Charities of California and the California Department on Aging and their local counterparts ([Rescue Agency case study calfresh healthy living, n.d.](#)).

Learn more about the behavior change approach, audience insights, and implementation strategies used in this [campaign here.](#)

To view the components of the campaign, [click here](#) to visit the California Department of Public Health webpage that hosts [tips and resources](#) used in the campaign.

Final Words

Effective communication of health information is essential in achieving equitable health outcomes for all individuals, particularly persons with limited education, lower income, chronic conditions, older adults and non-native English speakers (Hickey et al., 2018). Public health professionals can leverage the information and resources provided in this toolkit to develop communication strategies that meet the needs of the diverse populations they serve, thus helping to foster a more equitable society.



Resources

Tools for Strategic Health Messaging:



Plan your Communication – Smart Chart 4.0 by Spitfire Strategies

[Smart Chart Website](#) | [Direct Download](#)


Within six simple steps, this tool creates an adaptable plan based on your organizational goals by making strategic choices that identify the right objectives, messages, audiences and the tactics needed to achieve the change you seek. Smart Chart combines decades of communications experience and best practices into a single, effective and easy-to-use tool designed specifically for foundations and nonprofits.



Mindful Messaging by Spitfire Strategies

[Mindful Messaging Website](#) | [Direct Download](#)


Mindful Messaging is a Spitfire tool that will help you to thoughtfully consider who you are trying to engage, anticipate how their brains may process messaging and keep you from making predictable mistakes that set us back rather than propel us forward. It helps facilitate two-way communication so messaging leads to useful dialogue about important issues rather than dead ends.



AMERICAN
PSYCHOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

Equity, Diversity, *and* Inclusion

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE GUIDELINES

A collage of five small images showing diverse people in professional settings: a man and woman reviewing documents, a woman at a computer, a man at a computer, a woman speaking, and a man at a computer.

[Inclusive Language Guidelines](#)

American Psychological Association

This resource aims to provide guidance on how to use culturally sensitive terms in a way that centers those that are often marginalized or stereotyped.

“By embracing inclusive language and encouraging others to do the same, we firmly believe that we will not only communicate effectively with more people but also better adapt to a diversifying society and globe”
- *Maysa Akbar, PhD, ABPP, Chief Diversity Officer of the American Psychological Association*

CDC Clear Communication Index

A Tool for Developing and Assessing
CDC Public Communication Products

User Guide

[Clear Communication Index Widget](#)

The CDC Clear Communication Index (Index) is a research-based tool to help you develop and assess public communication materials.

The Index has 4 introductory questions and 20 scored items drawn from scientific literature in communication and related disciplines. The items represent the most important characteristics that enhance and aid people’s understanding of information.

[Click here](#) to learn how to add the Index widget to your website

Resources from Federal Organizations:

The following organizations have several health communication resources available for public health service providers to distribute or adapt to the needs of the communities they serve.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC): The CDC provides a variety of health communication resources, including toolkits, posters, infographics, and social media content, on topics such as COVID-19, vaccines, mental health, and more.

National Institutes of Health (NIH): The NIH offers health communication resources on a wide range of topics, including cancer, heart disease, infectious diseases, and more. They also have a health information hotline and a health information website.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA): SAMHSA provides health communication resources on mental health and substance abuse, including toolkits, brochures, and posters. They also have a national helpline for mental health and substance abuse support.

Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA): The HRSA offers health communication resources on topics such as maternal and child health, HIV/AIDS, and rural health. They also have a health information website and a national health service corps for healthcare professionals.

Food and Drug Administration (FDA): The FDA provides health communication resources on topics such as food safety, drug safety, and medical device safety. They also have a drug information hotline and a website with information on drug approvals and safety.

These are just a few examples of federal organizations that provide health communication resources for public health professionals. Other organizations include the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the National Cancer Institute (NCI).

Resources for Staff Development:

Skilful communication enables healthcare providers to establish rapport with their patients, solicit crucial health information, and work effectively with all members of a care team and the public. The following are recommended continuing education courses that can assist.



Region V Public Health Training Center-

Culturally Competent Public Health Practice for Deaf and Hard of Hearing



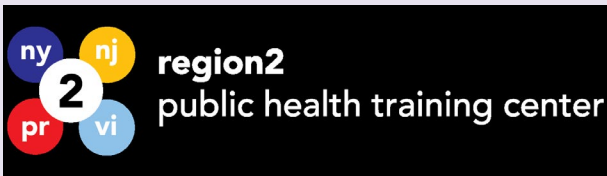
Boston University School of Public Health-

Designing Effective Infographics for Public Health



Global Health Learning Center-

Social Media for Health and Development



Region 2 Public Health Training Center-

Strategic Skills Training Series: Introduction to Persuasive Communication



Free Infographic Creator: Icon Array

CDC TRAIN – National learning network that provides thousands of quality training opportunities to more than 2 million professionals who protect and improve the public's health.

Public health professionals are encouraged to create an account to access to TRAIN course catalog which contains several courses related to health communication.



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