

## Health Literacy and Connections to the Storytelling Network

The Metamorphosis Project has found that each community has a unique **storytelling network** made up of connections between residents, community organizations and local geo-ethnic media. Our brochure, "Storytelling Strategies for Reaching Your Target Community," available at: [http://www.metamorph.org/our\\_research\\_findings](http://www.metamorph.org/our_research_findings) describes the story telling network in more detail.

Our research findings indicate that when residents are strongly connected to the storytelling network, they have higher levels of civic engagement. Residents who are strongly connected to the storytelling network also have better access to healthcare.

We have also found that **being strongly connected to the neighborhood storytelling network increases the likelihood that an individual will have high pragmatic health literacy.** This means that when individuals have strong ties to their neighbors, local community organizations and local geo-ethnic media, they are more likely to know how to prevent and detect the illnesses for which they are at high risk. This increased health literacy can translate into healthier day-to-day choices.

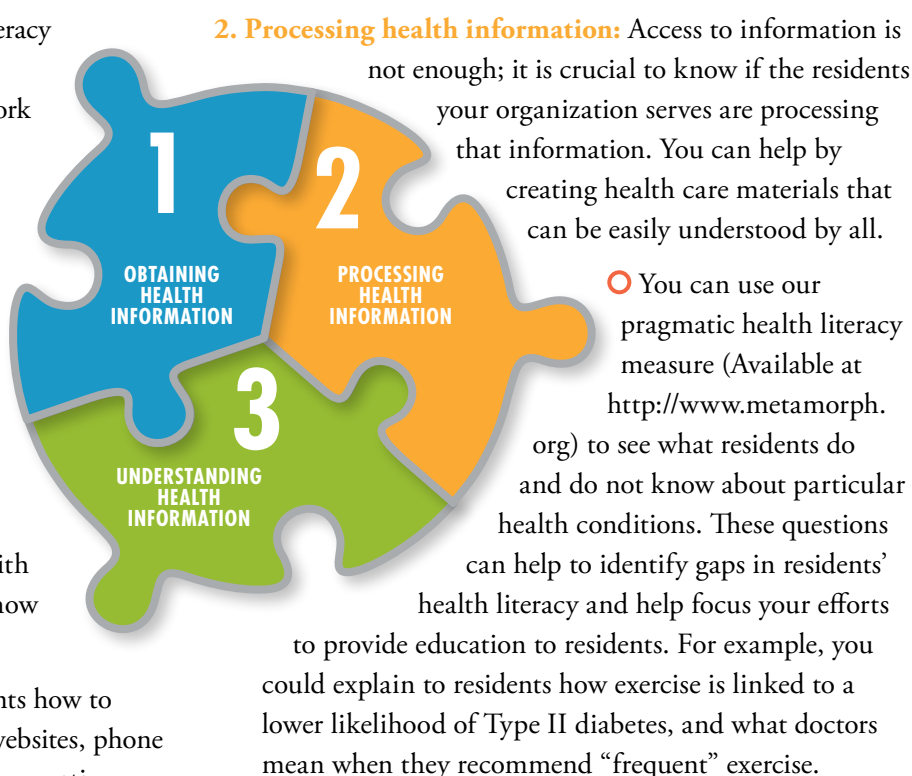
## Putting the Pieces Together: How Your Organization Can Improve Health Literacy in Your Community

Our finding that residents' health literacy is related to the strength of their connections to the storytelling network suggests steps your organization can take to improve health literacy in the community that you serve. We have outlined the ways that the storytelling network can help put the pieces of the puzzle together:

### 1. Obtaining health information:

Find out where residents you serve go for health information. Do they feel they have a trustworthy place they can go to with health questions? If not, show them how to access health information.

For example, you can teach residents how to connect with trustworthy health websites, phone numbers to call, or how to be more assertive with health care providers to have their questions answered. Your organization can also be part of the solution by providing health information on-site that can help to encourage increased health literacy, perhaps through bilingual brochures or bulletin board announcements.



**3. Understanding health information:** Here, it is important to look around your community to identify the difficulties residents may have in applying health information to their own lives.

- Are the streets and parks safe so that residents feel comfortable exercising? Is there an affordable gym in the area? Do the grocery stores stock reasonably priced fruits and vegetables?
- Take a look at the lives of the residents you serve. Do they work jobs that make it difficult to take a prescription three times a day? Could they use some tips and practices to reduce stress or to help them to get a good night's sleep?

It is important to remember that there are often barriers in our lives that prevent us from making the healthiest choices. Finding out what these barriers are in your community is the first step in developing strategies to help residents overcome them.

Tapping into your community's storytelling network can help to increase residents' health literacy. You can:

- Help residents become more integrated into their storytelling networks by hosting an open house and community discussion for residents to learn more about ways to live healthier lives, from each other and from your staff. Hosting an organization that teaches healthy cooking techniques could help residents take control of improving their health
- Find out what other organizations residents trust for health information and disseminate information through those channels.
- Develop relationships with trusted local media outlets and encourage them to tell stories that can develop residents' health literacy.

By integrating your organization into the neighborhood storytelling network and by helping your target population better connect to their storytelling network, you will be helping residents in your community improve their health literacy, and ultimately, their overall health.

Go to: [http://www.metamorph.org/our\\_research\\_findings](http://www.metamorph.org/our_research_findings) to download our earlier brochures that can help you identify the best media channels to reach your residents with health and community information.

## WHAT IS the Metamorphosis Project?

The Metamorphosis Project was born in 1992, in large part as a result of the uprisings that shook Los Angeles. Dr. Sandra J. Ball-Rokeach, the developer of Metamorphosis, knew that as a communication researcher, she should have something to contribute to policymakers and practitioners trying to bring about social change that enables stronger communities.

*The Metamorphosis Project—Transforming the Ties that Bind*, was officially launched in 1998 at the Annenberg School for Communication, University of Southern California (USC). Metamorphosis has conducted research on African Americans and Latinos in Greater Crenshaw; Anglos on the Westside and in Pasadena; ethnic Chinese groups in Greater Monterey Park; Koreans in Koreatown; Latinos in East LA, Pico Union, Huntington Park, Cudahy, and Southgate; and Anglos, Latinos, and Armenians in Glendale.

## Metamorphosis

For more information on what Metamorphosis has been doing and the projects we are currently engaged in, please visit our Web site: <http://www.metamorph.org>.

If you have questions or comments, please contact The Metamorphosis Project via e-mail at [meta@metamorph.org](mailto:meta@metamorph.org) or via telephone at (213) 740-1260.



## Why Health Literacy is an Important Part of the Health Disparity Puzzle

Community practitioners know that there are real challenges to helping people understand how to live healthier lives. Health literacy is a concept that can be a tool for understanding why residents of some communities have better understandings of health than others and why they exhibit healthier behaviors.

This brochure will explain what health literacy is, why it is important, and how improving health literacy can help address the health disparities that persist in different communities.

## What is Health Literacy?

Usually when we talk about literacy, we mean the ability to process and create written information. **Health literacy** is a little different. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services describes health literacy as the ability to "**obtain, process** and **understand** basic health information."

A person with high health literacy can:

- Gain access to the health information he or she needs
- Understand what that information means
- Apply that information to his or her life and health decisions

Having high health literacy means feeling comfortable negotiating and managing your health, including how you interact with the people who help you stay healthy.

Health literacy is a key contributor to good health. People with low health literacy may not know how to access to reliable health information, be able to fully comprehend health information, or be able to apply health information to their lives.

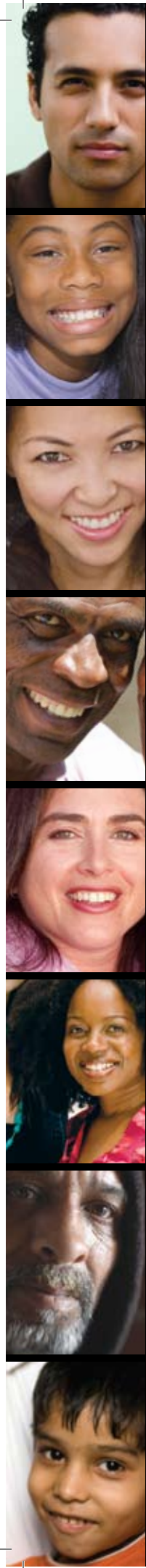
Research shows that people who have lower health literacy tend to be:

- Lower income
- Less educated
- Older
- Immigrants to the U.S.
- African American or Latino

Health literacy is an important tool for understanding *why* health disparities continue to persist in vulnerable communities. This understanding can help practitioners and policy makers to identify and work toward new ways of reducing health disparities.







Metamorphosis

The Three Components of Health Literacy

- 1. Obtaining health information:** Having a high level of health literacy means that you are able to access the health information you need. For example, if you want to know more about a particular health issue, you know where to look for reliable and helpful information.
- 2. Processing health information:** Accessing health information is a good start, but being able to process that information is what really makes a difference for health outcomes. Processing health information means that you can clearly understand the content of health information that you encounter.
- 3. Understanding health information:** Being able to understand and apply health information is the final step toward improved health literacy. Applying health information means that you can use the health information you have obtained and understood to improve your health and the health of your loved ones.

The challenge to increasing health literacy is figuring out how to connect these puzzle pieces so that residents are empowered to improve their health and the health of their families.

We'll take an in-depth look at the health literacy challenges in one Los Angeles community, and then discuss the ways that community practitioners can help to bring the pieces of this puzzle together for the residents in their communities.



A Different Way of Measuring Health Literacy

Most traditional measures only consider health literacy in relation to people who already have an illness or medical condition. These measures are primarily concerned with how people understand information given to them by doctors.

We realize, however, that health is an important matter for people who are healthy too and that health affects our lives in all our daily activities, not just at the doctor's office. For these reasons, we created a measure of what we call **pragmatic health literacy**. Pragmatic health literacy is health literacy having to do with the prevention and detection of a specific disease or condition.

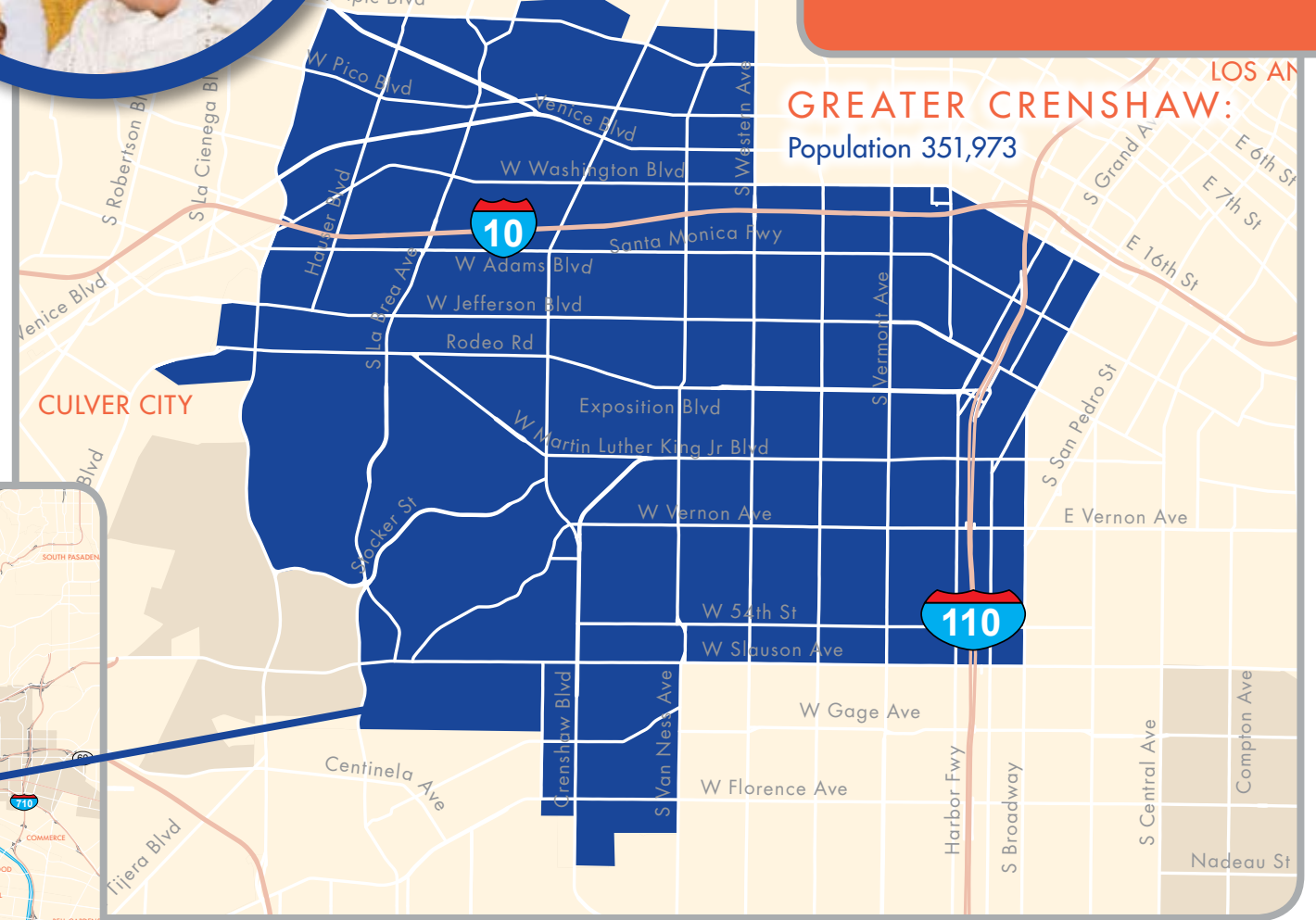
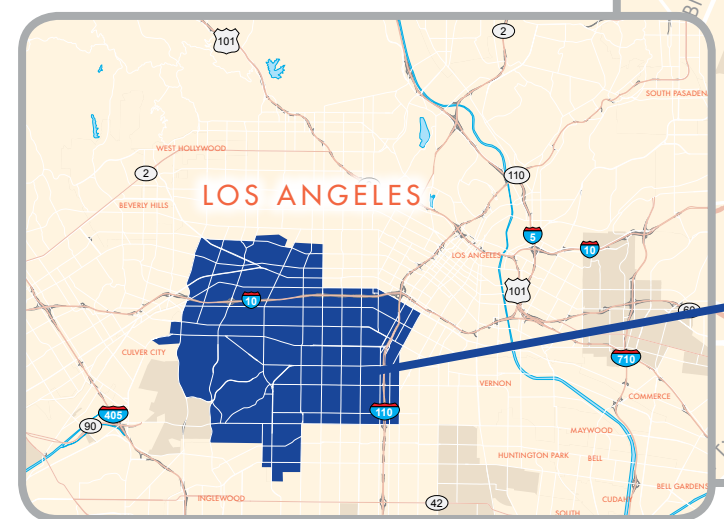
While other measures of health literacy usually test how sick people understand medical information, pragmatic health literacy tells us how people — both healthy and sick — understand and navigate their health in their everyday lives. This makes it an especially useful tool for non-profit and community organizations. Understanding pragmatic health literacy can help you better serve your community by helping you understand what residents know about preventing and detecting certain illnesses and conditions.

Measuring Health Literacy: The Case of Greater Crenshaw

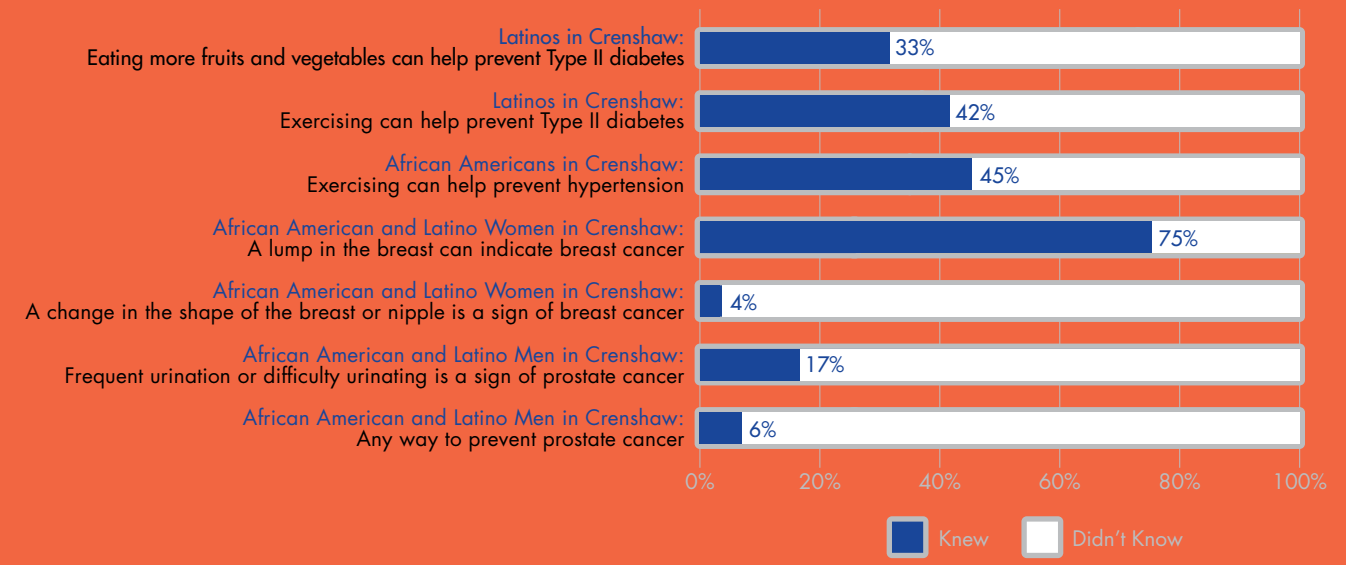
According to the National Institutes of Health, African Americans and Latinos are at risk for a number of serious conditions including diabetes, hypertension, and cancer. We measured the pragmatic health literacy of African Americans and Latinos living in a neighborhood of South Los Angeles for these specific diseases.

Greater Crenshaw is a neighborhood in South Los Angeles that includes the residential areas of Arlington Heights, the Crenshaw District, Jefferson Park, Ladera Heights, Leimert Park, Windsor Hills, and View Park. A traditionally African American community, Greater Crenshaw has undergone significant changes in recent years. While African Americans constituted 80% of the population in 1990, by 2000 they accounted for 45.6% of the Greater Crenshaw population as the Latino population in the community has increased in size.

Percentage African American	46%
Percentage Latino	37%
Median Age	39
Median Household Income	\$29, 951
Percentage High School Graduates	50%



We asked African American and Latino residents of Crenshaw to tell us what they think prevents or can help them detect Type II diabetes, high blood pressure, breast cancer, and prostate cancer. We found the following statistics regarding how much residents knew about preventing and detecting these conditions:



These low levels of pragmatic health literacy are significant because of the implications they have for the health of Greater Crenshaw residents. Our research has shown that people with higher levels of health literacy are much more likely to live the healthy lifestyles that can help prevent disease.

We have found that Greater Crenshaw residents with lower levels of pragmatic health literacy are:

- Less likely to eat fruits and vegetables and exercise
- Less likely to obtain yearly mammograms
- More likely to smoke cigarettes
- More likely to drink alcohol heavily

In other words, our research has found that an individual with low levels of pragmatic health literacy is significantly less likely to take the steps necessary to prevent that disease. Additionally, individuals with low levels of health literacy are less likely to obtain tests like mammograms which can detect breast cancer in its at early stages.

On the other hand, those with high health literacy take more steps to lead healthy lives and prevent illness. We found that residents with high health literacy eat more fruits and vegetables and exercise more often — behaviors that can help prevent a variety of diseases.