



Institute for
Healthcare Advancement

Advancing Health Literacy Toward Health Equity

Health Literacy Training; A Solution for Addressing Workforce Challenges

Key Takeways

- Health literacy training improves communication, supporting staff retention efforts and well-being.
- Better patient understanding leads to fewer unnecessary visits and reduced caseloads, lowering the risk of staff burnout.



White Paper

Introduction

Hospitals in the United States are struggling. According to the [Becker's Hospital Review newsletter](#), 25 U.S. hospitals and emergency departments shut their doors in 2024 (Ashley, 2024).

The situation is especially dire for rural hospitals. The [Center for Healthcare Quality and Payment Reform \(CHQPR\)](#) states that 1 out of 3 rural hospitals are at risk of closing (CHQPR, 2025).

2 Common Problems — and a Solution

This issue brief outlines two problems that many hospitals face (workforce shortages and insufficient reimbursement) and explains how workforce trainings in health literacy can help hospitals address these problems.

Organizational Health Literacy

[Healthy People 2030](#), an initiative of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), defines organizational health literacy as “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” (HHS).



Problem 1:

The U.S. healthcare system is contending with profound staffing shortages. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation [details](#) the shortages of primary care physicians, behavioral health workers, nurses, direct care workers, and others, which are especially pronounced in rural areas (HHS, 2024b).

The Cost of Workforce Shortages

As a result of workforce shortages, says the [American Hospital Association \(AHA\)](#), hospitals have greatly boosted wages to recruit and retain workers. They are also using contract labor to plug gaps in staffing (AHA, 2024).

These practices are costly. In 2023, labor accounted for 60% of hospital expenses, the [AHA](#) reports. Indeed, the growth in hospital worker earnings (45%) greatly outpaced U.S. inflation (29%) between 2014 and 2023 (AHA, 2024).

The Cause of Workforce Shortages: Employee Burnout

The [AHA](#) notes that resignations among healthcare staff jumped 50% between 2020 and 2023. It attributes these defections to employee burnout caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, administrative burden, and violence against hospital workers, among other factors (AHA, 2024).

How Workforce Health Literacy Trainings Can Help

Workforce health literacy trainings teach healthcare leaders and staff strategies for effective communication. These skills improve employee wellbeing and retention while mitigating staffing shortages. Here's how.



Better Communication Between Healthcare Leaders and Workers

Effective communication **between healthcare leaders and workers** boosts employee wellbeing, thereby supporting retention.

In its Impact [Wellbeing™ Guide](#), the HHS National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health outlines six actions hospital leaders and executives can take to improve healthcare worker wellbeing. Action 4 (Communicate Your Commitment to Professional Wellbeing) involves developing a plan for two-way communication with hospital staff about efforts to enhance staff wellbeing (HHS, 2024a).

Leader-worker communication should be “clear, consistent, and open,” says [the guide](#). This type of exchange promotes the flow of information, builds trust, and shows staff that leaders care about their feedback (HHS, 2024a).

Better Communication Among Healthcare Workers

Effective communication **among healthcare workers** also supports employee wellbeing and retention.

A [recent article](#) noted that new graduate nurses “are particularly vulnerable to increased stress, isolation, and dissatisfaction with their job due to poor communication and teamwork with other healthcare professionals.” It argues for training these workers in communication skills as a means to enhance wellbeing and retention (Leonard et al., 2022).

Better Communication Between Healthcare Workers and Patients

Finally, effective communication **between healthcare workers and patients** decreases the number of hospitalized patients — effectively reducing caseloads. This decrease mitigates staffing shortages.

When healthcare workers communicate well with patients, their patients are more likely to get preventive care, such as recommended screenings and vaccines, according to a [report](#) by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. As a result, these patients make fewer unneeded trips to the emergency department. Likewise, they have fewer preventable hospital stays and lower readmission rates since they understand their care and know how to use healthcare resources more effectively (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).

Problem 2:

According to the [AHA](#), payers don't reimburse nearly enough for hospital services. Between 2021 and 2023, U.S. inflation grew at more than twice the rate of Medicare reimbursement for hospital inpatient care. And insufficient reimbursement isn't a problem just for government payers. In 2023, across all payers, payments for inpatient behavioral healthcare averaged 34% below costs, while payments for outpatient burn and wound care averaged 43% below costs (AHA, 2024).

The Transition to Value-Based Reimbursement Programs

According to the [Commonwealth Fund](#), U.S. healthcare is increasingly moving from traditional fee-for-service models to value-based reimbursement programs. These programs link “the amount healthcare providers earn for their services to the results they deliver for their patients, such as the quality, equity, and cost of care” (Commonwealth Fund, 2023).

How Workforce Health Literacy Trainings Can Help

Workforce health literacy trainings can help hospitals maximize payments. They do so by improving three metrics that value-based reimbursement programs care about: healthcare usage, health outcomes, and patient experience.

Better Healthcare Usage

As we've discussed, when patients receive health literate care, they are [more likely to get preventive care](#). Consequently, these patients make fewer unneeded trips to the emergency department. They also have fewer preventable hospital stays and lower readmission rates (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018).



Better Health Outcomes

Studies show that patients who get health literate care [manage their chronic conditions better](#) (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). For instance, [health literacy interventions](#) help patients with type 2 diabetes keep their blood sugar in a healthy range (Butayeva et al., 2023). Likewise, using [clear language](#) on drug labels helps older, less educated patients take their medicines as prescribed (Wolf et al., 2020). As a result, these patients lead longer, healthier lives. Improved health outcomes also lead to greater health equity, which [Healthy People 2030](#) defines as “the attainment of the highest level of health for all people” (HHS).

Better Patient Experience

Finally, providing health literate care can [boost patient satisfaction](#) (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). It can also lead to higher scores on the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems (HCAHPS). [Many](#) of these surveys ask patients how easy they find it to understand their clinicians (Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, 2023). Health literate care leaves patients more satisfied and results in better scores for hospitals.



Conclusion

As we've seen, workforce trainings in health literacy can help hospitals address two problems that many hospitals face: workforce shortages and insufficient reimbursement.

- **Workforce Shortages.** Workforce health literacy trainings teach healthcare leaders and staff strategies for effective communication that improve employee wellbeing and retention while mitigating staffing shortages.
- **Insufficient Reimbursement.** Workforce health literacy trainings help hospitals maximize payments by improving three metrics that value-based reimbursement programs care about: healthcare usage, health outcomes, and patient experience.

A Workforce Health Literacy Training Program for the Future

The Institute for Healthcare Advancement (IHA) [Health Literacy Specialist Certificate Program](#) equips hospital leaders and staff with the expertise they need to cope with workforce shortages and inadequate reimbursement. It's the only accredited health literacy training program acknowledged by the Institute for Credentialing Excellence and approved by the American National Standards Institute.

About IHA

IHA is a nonprofit, 501(c)(3) public benefit charity, at the forefront of bridging health literacy and health equity advancement. IHA offers two complementary platforms designed to empower, educate, and support healthcare professionals and organizations. IHA's Health Literacy Solutions Center supports community networking supported by discussions, articles, blogs, webinars, and research. IHA's Health Literacy Academy promotes professional development in health literacy through knowledge, skills training, conferences, and consulting services. healthliteracysolutions.org | ihaacademy.org

Conclusion

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