



Bridging the Gap: A Solution to Health Literacy Disparity



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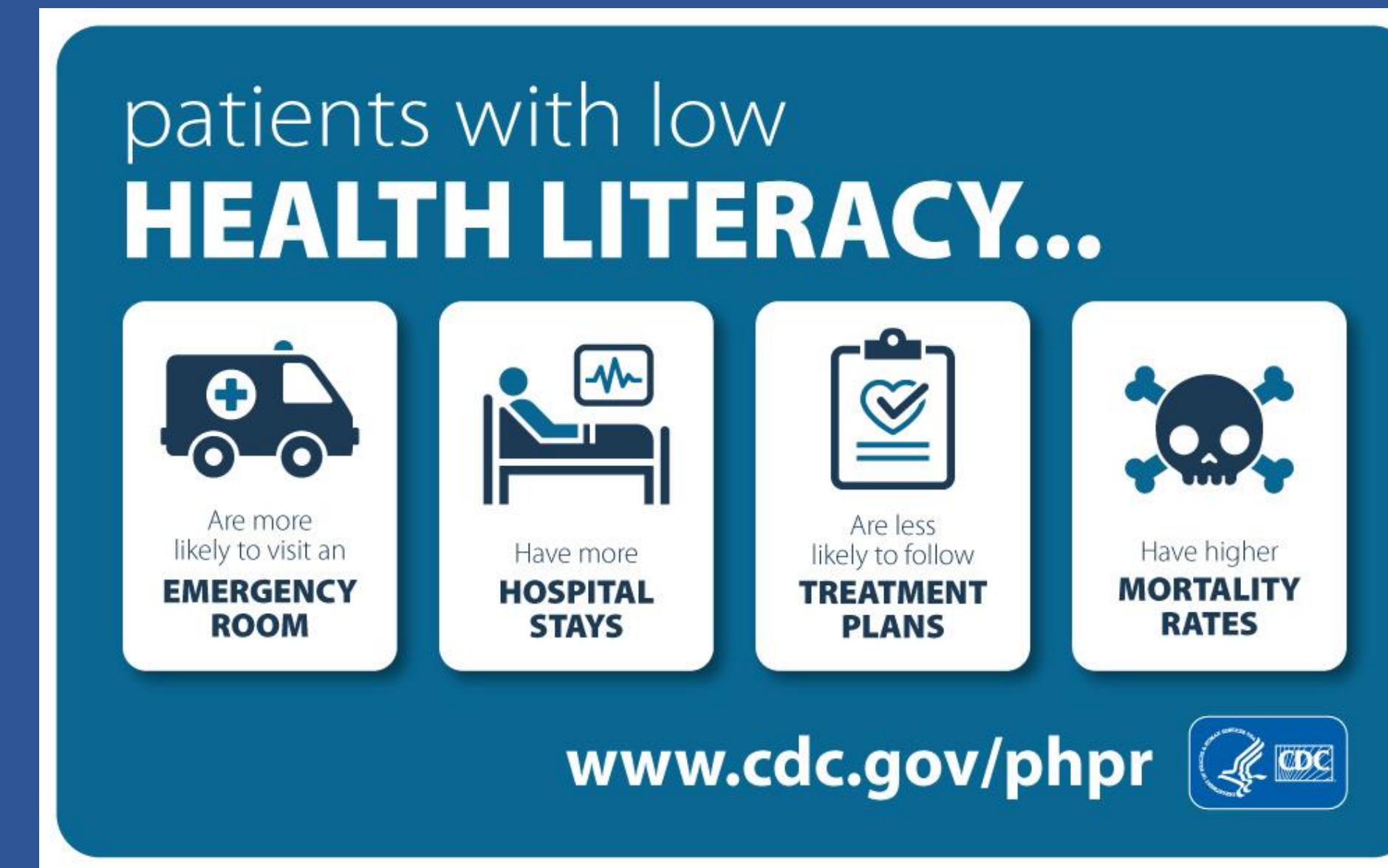
INTRODUCTION

Low health literacy is a serious problem currently plaguing the health care system, thus leading to poorer health outcomes. Health literacy is the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services. It is a critical determinant in an individual's ability to make appropriate health decisions and navigate the healthcare system. Unfortunately, approximately 80 million U.S. adults have limited health literacy, thereby increasing their risk for poor health outcomes. Low health literacy is associated with increased hospitalizations and emergency room visits in addition to decreased screening/preventative management. The health literacy disparity is substantially more prominent amongst minority populations, including African Americans, Hispanics, individuals with lower socioeconomic status, and those with limited education.

Project HEAL is an intervention designed to provide health literacy classes to an underprivileged and underserved population in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Researchers from Marquette University's Physician Assistant program partnered with Literacy for Life, who designed a validated health literacy curriculum, HEAL. Using this curriculum, researchers taught seven one-hour group classes to residents of the Milwaukee County supportive housing division sites at St. Anthony's and United House.

AIM

To address health literacy disparities by teaching an educational course on health-related issues to low-income minority individuals at two supportive housing units in Milwaukee.



Infographic: Health Literacy. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. <https://www.cdc.gov/cpr/infographics/healthliteracy.htm>. Published November 30, 2016. Accessed March 21, 2020.

METHODS

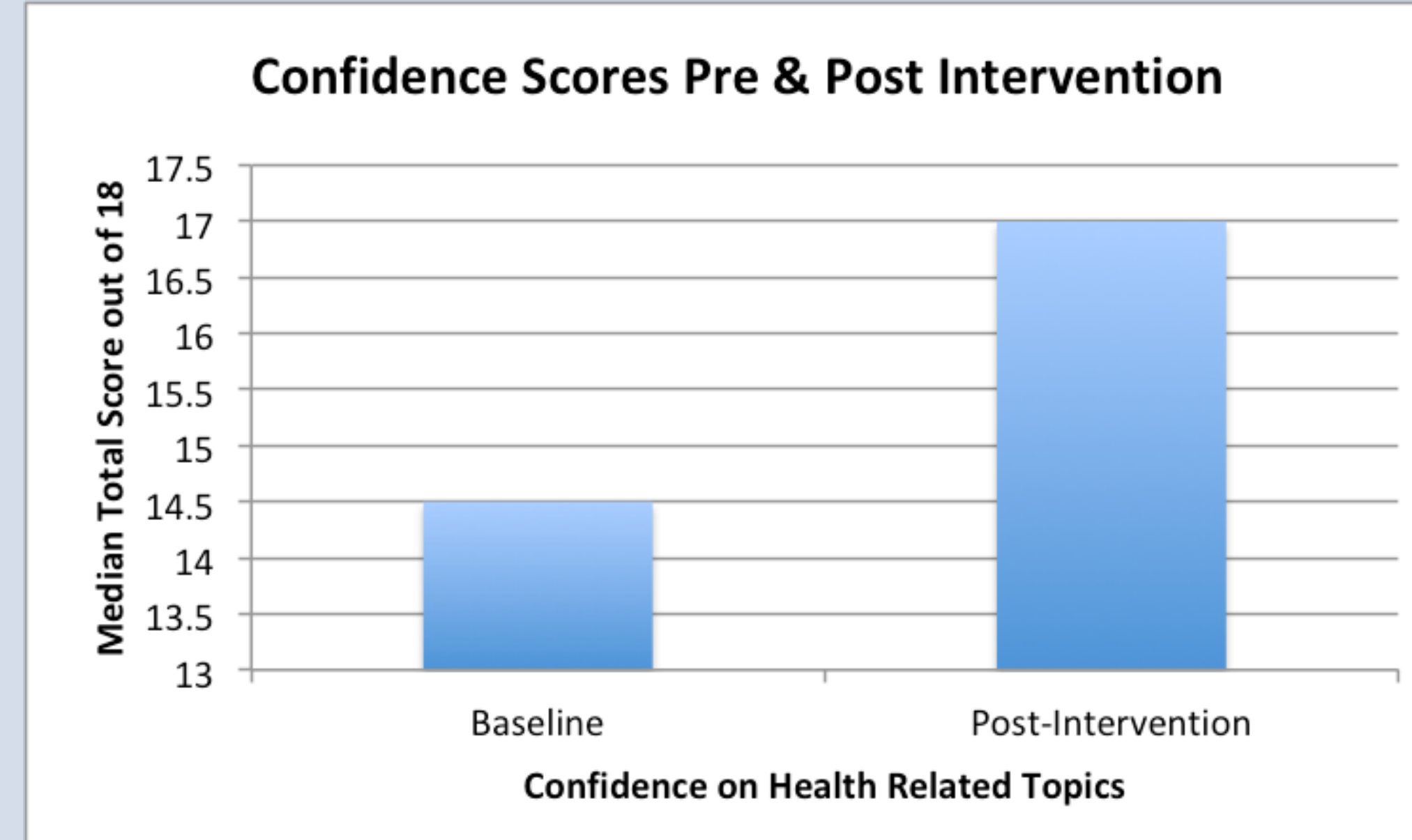
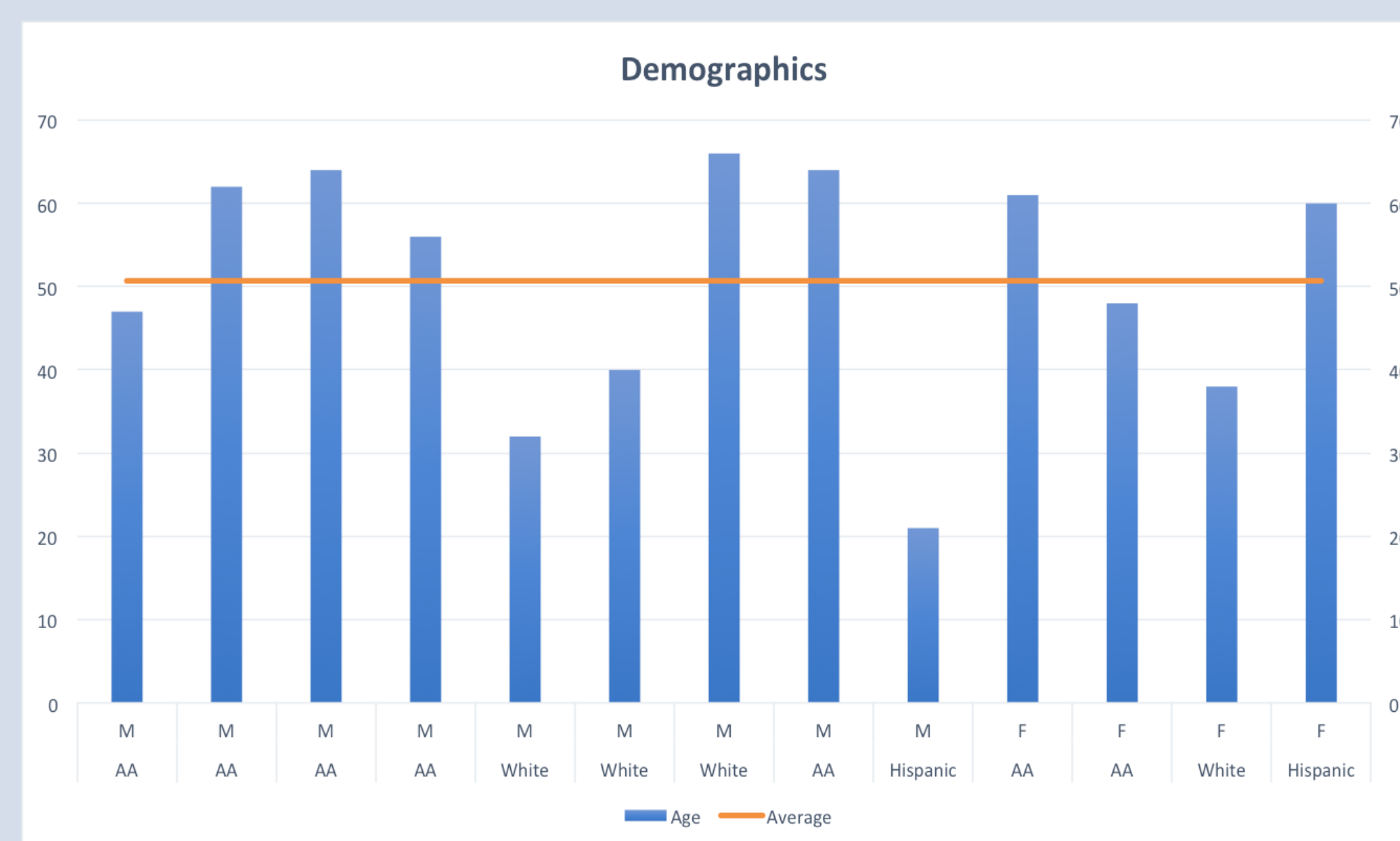
To conduct this study, the researchers utilized Literacy for Life's validated Health Education and Literacy (HEAL) curriculum. Researchers received training via web-based certification as HEAL health literacy curriculum educators to teach the curriculum.

The curriculum included seven 60-minute lessons, which were taught twice a week over the course of three weeks. Classes were taught with an interactive, classroom-style approach utilizing lesson books, open-ended questions, and bingo vocabulary games. Each class covered a health-related topic, including but not limited to, healthy eating, taking medication properly, scheduling appointments, and preventative health screening.

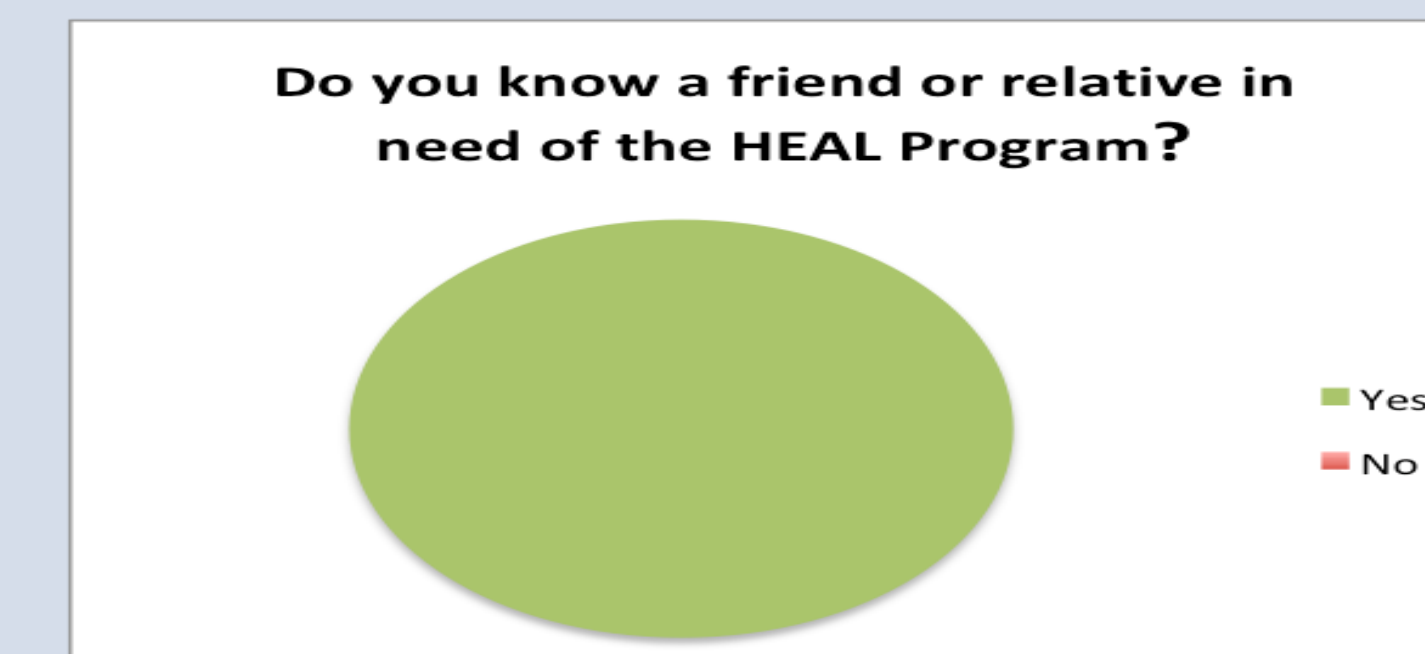
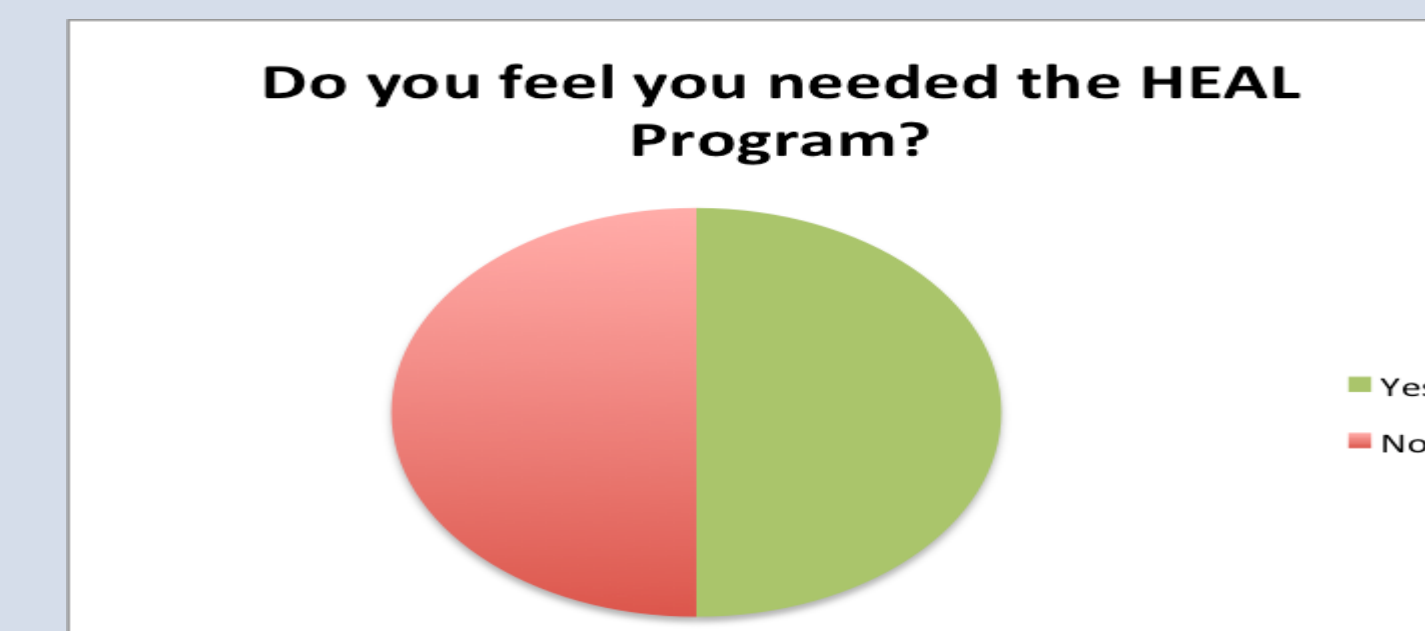
Researchers recruited adult learners in advance through advertisement, door-to-door recruitment, and coordination with respective on-site case manager. To encourage attendance and participation, incentives were provided including healthy snacks/refreshments and toiletries. On the last day, the individuals who attended 6/7 classes received a \$10 gift card to Walgreens and a printed certificate of completion.

Data was collected via utilization of a demographic form, a pre-curriculum and post-curriculum Likert scale survey, a validated REALM-SF test, and a post-curriculum exit interview. Additionally, a 2-month follow-up evaluation with learners was scheduled to assess the continuation of the project's outcomes. Structured interviews provided qualitative feedback on the success of the program.

DEMOGRAPHICS & PARTICIPANT SURVEY RESULTS



Necessity Evaluation Post Intervention



Participant Responses

"The whole course was helpful, we had good discussions on all topics."
 "It went by too quick and felt like it just started."
 "Nothing was least helpful, I tried to take something out of every aspect of the lesson."
 "I like the ability to ask lots of questions, which they did. They helped me decipher a radiology report."

RESULTS

The HEAL project reached a total of 13 participants, both men and women between the ages of 21 and 64 with diverse ethnic backgrounds and varying levels of highest educational attainments. Of the individuals who attended the classes, 69% of the individuals identified as a minority (7 as African American and 2 as Hispanic), a group most impacted by the disparity. The highest educational attainment ranged from completion of 6th grade to a master's degree. Two students utilized the "basic" level lesson book and the remainder utilized the "advanced" level lesson book. However, researchers found that health literacy level did not correlate with overall literacy level or highest educational attainment.

Overall, the implementation of project HEAL proved to be a beneficial course for student learners. 13 individuals attended at least 1 HEAL class and 8 individuals attended 6 out of 7 classes. In the post interview surveys, positive feedback from participants confirmed benefit of the HEAL curriculum.

Some key findings include:

- HEAL participants showed statistically significant improvement in confidence about health-related topics
- 100% of participants plan to recommend the HEAL program to a friend or family member
- 100% of participants wanted the curriculum to be more extensive, including more topics and longer class duration

At the 2-month follow-up appointment, learners reported continued benefit from the HEAL curriculum and personal utilization of the HEAL lesson book that they were encouraged to keep at the end of the curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

Overall, Project HEAL validates the need for and benefit of health literacy education in a sample of low-income, predominantly minority individuals in Milwaukee, WI. While our intervention only reached 13 individuals, these 13 individuals are now more confident and better educated on important health topics. Each participant who completed the HEAL curriculum is better equipped to adequately take care of themselves and share their knowledge with family and friends. In addition to educating the general public, we also hope this project increases awareness within the medical community. Physician Assistants have the power to help combat low health literacy every day through proper patient education and communication. Improving population health is identified as an objective of Healthy People 2020. To do this, it will be fundamental to focus on improving health literacy nationwide. Project HEAL is one step in the direction towards a healthier community for patients and providers alike.

Next steps to further address poor health literacy center around sustainability. While our team has performed follow up visits with our learners thus far, it is simply not enough to tackle this issue. Our goal is that future Marquette PA students continue teaching this curriculum, expanding to more sites in the community, and eventually enlisting the support of healthcare organizations to prevent poor health outcomes related to low healthy literacy.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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