



# Creating Literacy Friendly Environments

## Introduction

Literacy friendly agencies recognize some adults have difficulties with reading, writing and related communication practices. They address these difficulties to make it easier for all people to access their services.

This workshop is for staff who want to create or enhance literacy friendly environments in their agencies or organizations.

## Workshop intentions

- Identify the features and benefits of an LFE
- See an agency from the perspective of a client with literacy challenges
- Identify the steps in becoming an LFE
- Identify where changes can be made in an agency
- Create an LFE makeover action plan

Other intentions or objectives you would like to include:

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_

Developed by Michael Wallace, 2008.

Widening Access for Adult Literacies Project.

<http://www.wideningaccessforliteracies.ca>



## About literacy

In Canada, literacy is often defined as the ability to read and interpret printed information, write, and do mathematical calculations to perform everyday tasks— at work, at home and in the community. In 2009, the Alberta government issued a provincial literacy strategy. It included the following guiding definition:

*... While reading and writing provide the necessary foundation for learning, literacy is fundamentally about an individual's capacity to put his/her skills to work in shaping the course of his or her own life. Literacy involves "reading the word and the world" in a variety of contexts. Individuals need literacy skills to obtain and use information effectively, to act as informed players and to manage interactions in a variety of contexts whether the context is making decisions about health care, parenting, managing household finances, engaging in the political process or working.*<sup>1</sup>

This definition recognizes that reading not only includes reading skills and strategies but that reading is carried out for various purposes and in various social contexts.<sup>2</sup>

## About literacies

In the Widening Access project we used the term "literacies" to recognize that literacy is not only a set of cognitive skills or strategies. Literacies include a wide range of social and cultural practices that are associated with reading, writing and oral communication.

People read and write for meaning. They use their knowledge of a topic and of the situation to make sense as they read and write. Reading is affected by purposes and situations as well as the feelings and values associated with them.

Literacies also recognizes that reading and writing are social in the sense that people often help each other out and share what they are reading or writing: "What does this word mean?" "How about you read the instructions while I put the shelf together." "How do you spell....?"

And a literacies perspective values the range of literacies that are based in everyday activities and networks, as well as the traditionally more valued literacies associated with schools, workplaces, legal and medical, government and similar institutions. At the same time, literacies recognizes that institutional literacies are often more powerful than others.

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<sup>1</sup> Alberta Advanced Education and Technology. (2009). p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Definitions of literacy are now expanding to include "Essential Skills" such as oral communication, computer skills, the ability to work with others and continuous learning. For more information about Essential Skills go to: Human Resources and Skill Development Canada. Understanding Essential Skills. [http://www.rhdcc-hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential\\_skills/general/understanding\\_es.shtml](http://www.rhdcc-hrsdc.gc.ca/eng/workplaceskills/essential_skills/general/understanding_es.shtml)

From a “literacies” perspective, some adults who are not able to score well on literacy test may manage literacies in their social contexts. A literacies perspective also provides starting points for creating literacy friendly environments.

## About literacy statistics

The *International adult literacy survey* (1994-98) and the *International adult literacy and skills survey* (2003) measured literacy skills of adults in Canada and six other countries. The surveys used common tasks of varying difficulty to assess adults’ literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills. The literacy tasks included reading prose and reading documents.

From a literacies perspective, it is important to note that completing a task in the survey was not the same as completing an actual task in a real context. For example, reading instructions on an actual medicine bottle in your own home for a real purpose is different from reading similar instructions in the survey. Still, the survey results do show that many adults in Canada have challenges with literacy.

The survey developers used a 500-point scale to rate the complexity of reading tasks. This scale was divided into 5 levels of reading proficiency.<sup>3</sup> In Canada, it is generally suggested that adults need skills at level three to “participate fully in the knowledge economy.”<sup>4</sup> According to the 2003 survey, 42% of Canada’s working age population has reading skills below level three.

Some people who scored below level three can read well enough to cope with everyday situations, but they may have difficulty with unfamiliar literacies or in new situations involving literacy. Literacy friendly environments can make it easier for people to manage when reading and writing is required.

## Steps towards creating a literacy friendly environment

1. Bring the LFE idea to the attention of senior agency staff to:
  - Identify the features and benefits of an LFE.
  - Develop and increase literacy awareness among agency staff.
  - Identify the benefits of creating an LFE.
  - Identify the components of an LFE.
2. Conduct an LFE walkabout in the agency.
3. Identify areas for change.
4. Create an action plan for achievable change.
5. Support and encourage a process of gradual change.
6. Provide recognition for becoming an LFE champion.

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<sup>3</sup> A Frontier College summary of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) 2003. Retrieved April 30, 2010 from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/frontier/ialss03/cover.htm>

<sup>4</sup> International survey of reading skills. The Daily. Statistics Canada Retrieved April 30, 2010 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/080109/dq080109a-eng.htm>

## Develop and increase literacy awareness among agency staff

One way is to conduct a literacy awareness quiz.

1. What is the percentage of Canadian adults with low literacy?

- 7%
- 18%
- 29%
- 42%

2. What is the percentage of adults in Alberta with low literacy?

- 10%
- 19%
- 27%
- 35%

3. Literacy means being able to read and write.

- a. True
- b. False

4. Adult Literacy is the responsibility of the educational system.

- a. True
- b. False

5. Most adults with low literacy in Canada are immigrants.

- a. True
- b. False

6. School completion ensures that a person will have strong literacy skills.

- a. True
- b. False

See Appendix 1 for answers.

## I identify the benefits of creating a literacy friendly environment

Agency Benefits

Client Benefits

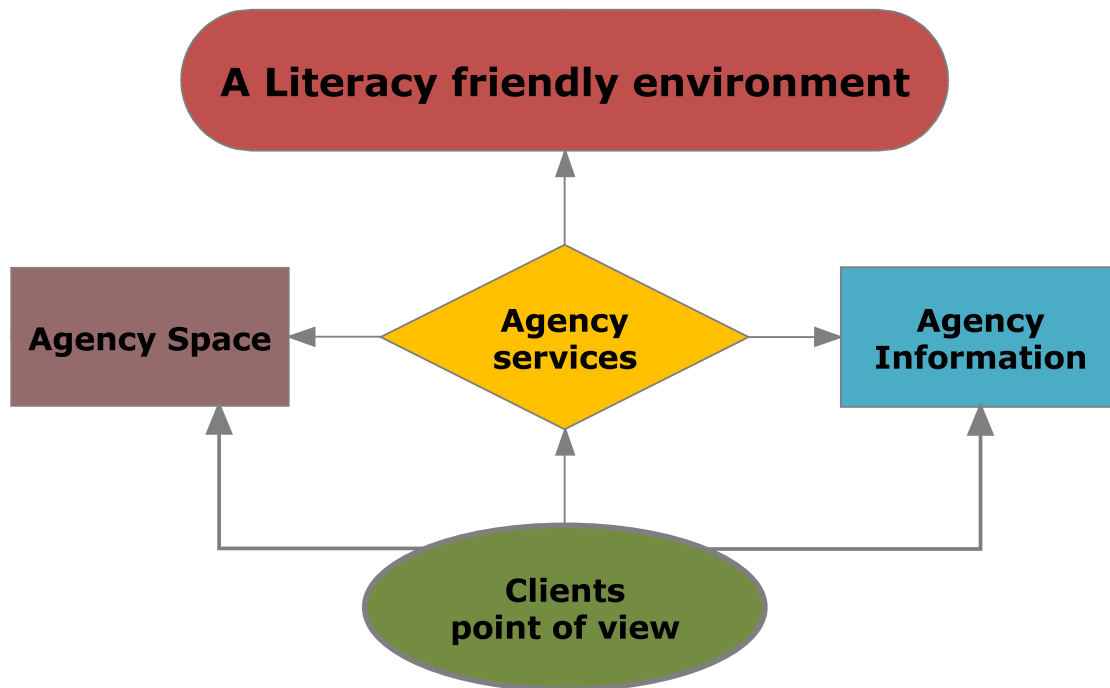
Sell the key benefits to agency staff

They include:

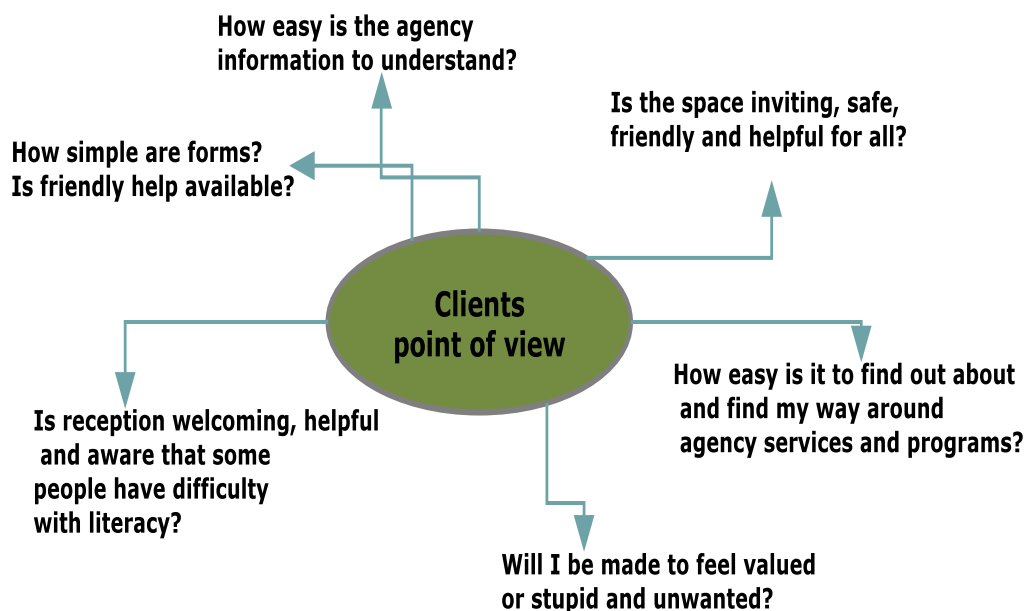
- Widening access and reducing barriers for more clients
- Better and more efficient customer service

Other benefits include:

## The components of a literacy friendly environment



## Understanding the client's point of view is crucial



## Literacy learners' voices<sup>5</sup>

Lil: *Literacy is a different word for every different face.*

Harry: *Some people think that everyone can read. They say, "We all had the same chance." But we didn't.*

Marie: *I was the oldest and I had to stay home most of the time because my mother was deaf. I was her interpreter.*

Lil: *I came from a family of 12. I had to leave school to pick and plant potatoes to help pay the family store bill so we could eat.*

Phil: *All of my family had grade 12, but I had brain tumor that stopped me from learning to read.*

Bev: *I knew I had a problem with reading but I never knew why. I loved school but I didn't get the help I needed.*

Marilyn: *I had trouble speaking and I got teased a lot. I kind of shut down.*

Lil: *Problems with literacy can block the way.*

Bev: *I went to a doctor's office last week. The receptionist gave me a form. I said I can't fill it out. The doctor had to help me.*

Marilyn: *When I told someone I had trouble filling in forms because of the big words, he said, "Why don't you just use a dictionary."*

Marie: *How can you use a dictionary if you can't read the words?*

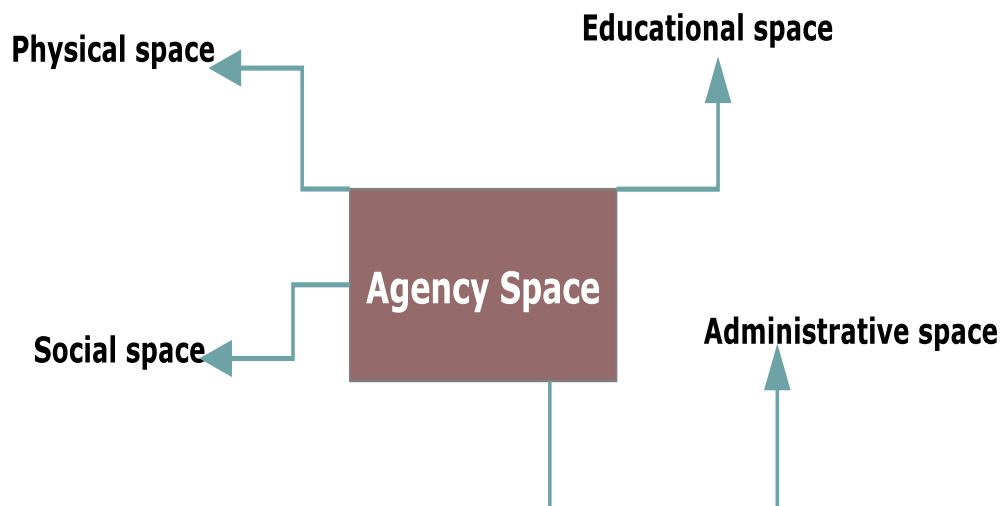
Lil: *If I had to write special letters, my sister helped, like when I wrote to find out about my son that I had to give up.*

Harry: *I used to take applications home and have my sister fill them out.*

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<sup>5</sup> Participants in the Students Voices for Students project created scripts based on their experiences with literacy challenges. They used the scripts to make presentations to a range of audiences to raise awareness about literacy challenges. This is an excerpt from one of their scripts. Students Voices for Students was sponsored by The Learning Centre Literacy Association and funded by the Edmonton Community Adult Learning Association.

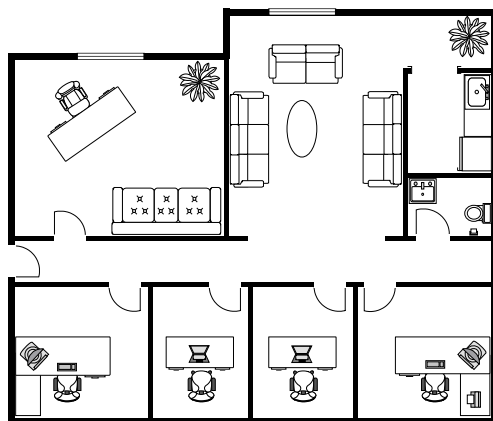
## Review agency space



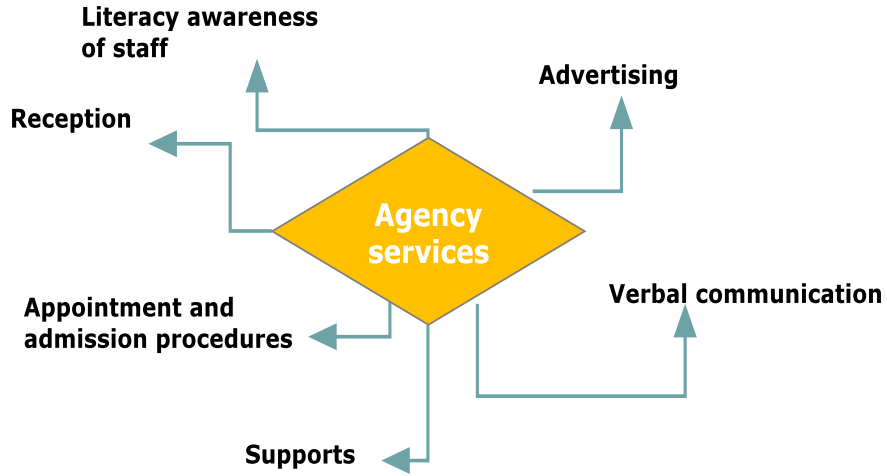
Some points to consider

- How is physical space used? How easy is it to find your way around? How well signed are work areas? What is the general atmosphere? Are there waiting areas, areas for privacy? How is information displayed?
- Does the space feel safe, friendly and supportive?
- Are there social places to meet, socialize, network and relax?
- Is reception formal, informal, complicated, officious, straightforward?

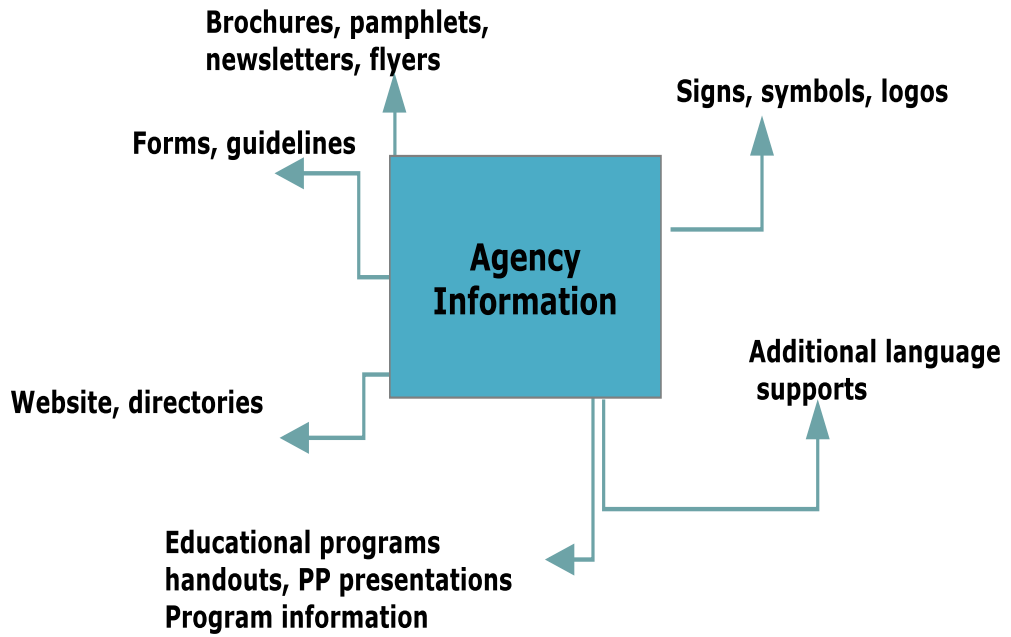
## Make a map of the agency space



## Review agency service delivery



## Review agency information



## A LFE walkabout

A good way to start the process of creating a literacy friendly environment is to take a walk through your own agency. If possible, visit two or more agencies.

Start by coming through the front entrance of the agency. Try to see the agency through the eyes of a new or known client with literacy challenges. Watch for examples of how the agency both supports and hinders a literacy friendly environment and make notes about the following:

- How clear are the signs, symbols and displays that explain the agency services and direct you around the agency environment?
- Can you tell what services and supports the agency provides when you walk in?
- How easy is it to tell who/what/when/how/where the agency serves?
- What agency jargon could be a barrier to you understanding the services provided?
- Do you need to fill out a form to use the agency's services? How easy is the form to read and complete?
- Is friendly, helpful, confidential assistance readily available?

## After the walkabout

- Discuss what you discovered
- What features of the agency help support or hinder an LFE?

Support

Hinder



- Use the Literacy Alberta checklists (Appendix 2) to help identify areas for improvement and strategies for change.

### Possible improvements

Identify priorities for making changes.

Identify strategies to carrying out these priority changes.

### Create a realistic action plan

Identify at least two areas for change that your agency could take action on to create a more literacy friendly environment. Complete the action plan below.

| Areas for change | Strategies for change | Who will implement these strategies? | When will this happen? |
|------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------|
| 1.               |                       |                                      |                        |
| 2.               |                       |                                      |                        |
| 3.               |                       |                                      |                        |

## Start a literacy makeover in your agency

### Changing agency spaces

#### Physical space

- Map the agency space.
- Make notes of possible improvements.
- Take before and after pictures of the process.
- Talk to staff and clients about how they view the suggested changes.
- Empty the space and bring items back based on the clients' viewpoints.
- Reduce clutter in the reception area.
- Create a waiting area for clients to prevent congestion at reception.

#### Signage

- Create signage for the inner and outer area of the agency that explain where the agency is located, welcomes clients to the agency, explains in simple language opening and closing times and what services the agency provides.
- Include easy-to-read signs for the entrance, reception, information boards and help with form filling.

#### Notice Boards and displays

- Create a notice board for current and upcoming programs and events at the agency.
- Create a community notice board for outside events and programs offered by allied agency services.
- Create binders of your own agency services and programs to display in the waiting area.
- Display up-to-date binders of other community brochures, flyers and information leaflets.
- Keep all information current and clear away out of date flyers and posters.
- Make literacy awareness part of the employee orientation process.

### Changing agency services

#### First steps

- Identify what knowledge and literacy skills a client needs in order to use your agency's services.
- Identify jargon that is specific to your agency. Develop simple ways to explain these terms to clients.
- Learn to recognize signs that clients may have reading or writing difficulties. Be sensitive to clients' situations.
- Have staff available to assist clients with any reading or writing tasks.
- Offer all clients the same help to avoid drawing attention to people with literacy problems.
- Accommodate clients who may want to bring friends or spokespersons to their meetings with staff. Allow others to assist as needed.
- Have translators available to help clients who don't speak English easily.

### First contact

- Collect intake information over the phone to reduce the need to fill out forms at the reception desk.
- Give simple directions over the phone, including bus route numbers, so clients can find you easily.

### Help with reading and writing tasks

- Ask all clients if they need help with completing forms.
- Use literacy sensitive lead-ins such as: "I'm not sure the questions on this form are very clear. Let's go over them together." OR The print on this form can be hard to read. Can I help you with it?"

### Referral

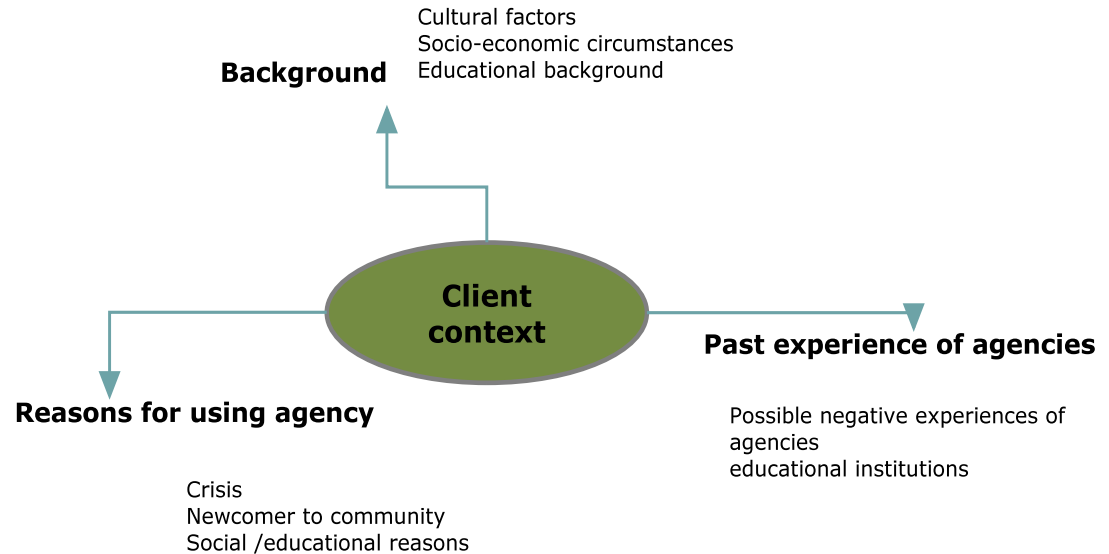
- Be familiar with literacy programs in the community. Contact programs and introduce yourself to program staff. Find out about programs' referral and registration processes.
- Display posters and other information on adult literacy programs.
- When people ask about programs, offer to help contact the program. Provide a name and phone number to call.

### Changing agency information

- Take training in clear language principles and practices.
- Use clear language principles when you prepare print materials:
  - Provide information in logical sequences. Use point form.
  - State and respond to typical client questions.
  - Use simple sentence structures and avoid jargon.
  - Aim for a readability level of 7 or below using the Flesch/Kincaid readability scale. (You can set the readability function in Microsoft Word spell check.)
  - Use a large font, plenty of space and illustrations that support understanding of text.
  - Have a contrast between background colours and printed words.
  - Align text to the left.
- Develop brochures, pamphlets, posters, forms and websites with input from the community and some of your clients.
- Obtain client feedback before printing/copying materials. Pre-test a brochure with students in a literacy program in your area.
- Design posters and information signs that can be read from a distance and that provide helpful illustrations and directional indicators where appropriate.
- Review and improve your printed materials on a regular basis.
- Make print-based materials available in other languages where appropriate.

The Widening Access for Adult Literacies website includes information about clear language.

## Make your agency environment friendly for all clients



Consider the backgrounds and circumstances of your clients and customers:

- Do you present information in the dominant additional languages of clients who use your services?
- Are childcare facilities available?
- Are needs for privacy and confidentiality respected?

Consider the changes you could make in your own agency:

- Increase literacy awareness.
- Sell the benefits and explain the features of a literacy friendly environment.
- Conduct a literacy awareness walkabout.
- Consider criteria for change – Space/Service/Information.
- Create an action plan for gradual change.
- Kick-start a literacy makeover in the agency.
- Make clear language changes to agency newsletters, brochures, flyers, etc.
- Start a literacy network. Host network meetings.

## Forming a Literacy Network

Towards the end of the Widening Access for Adult Literacies project, staff from project partner agencies decided to form a literacy network, which they named the Northeast Edmonton Literacy Network. The following information and ideas are from this network. There is a link to the network's blog on the Widening Access for Adult Literacies website (Northeast Edmonton Literacy Network page).

### What do agencies want?

"For the Literacy Network to be an action group."

"A network that would share ideas, knowledge and resources as well as find practical ways to make our agencies and communities more 'literacy friendly'."

"To promote the cause of literacy."

"Meet on a regular basis with someone to coordinate meetings, agenda and minutes."

"Take minutes and keep people up to-date with news."

### What agencies might get involved?

- Parenting programs
- Community agencies
- Government departments (employment, social services, community services)
- Employment Programs
- Libraries
- Literacy programs
- Aboriginal Programs

### What happens at Network meetings?

- Member agencies host network meetings and conduct agency walkabouts at the start of meetings and identify literacy friendly changes for that agency.
- Meetings generally have a round of literacy news.
- Members share information and resources about what is happening in the community to support literacy awareness.
- Network members identify and organize professional development workshops that support the development of literacy awareness, understanding and resourcing to the wider community of agency staff.
- Members organize Literacy events in the community: International Literacy Day, literacy book launches, etc.

### Why do members keep coming?

"We are more than just one organization. We're a part of a movement."

"Action oriented meetings - things happen, not just information sharing."

## Appendix 1. Literacy Awareness Quiz Answers

1. What is the percentage of Canadian adults with low literacy?  
7%, 18%, 29%, 42%

The *International adult literacy and skills survey (2003)* measured literacy skills of adults in Canada and six other countries. The survey used common tasks of varying difficulty to assess adults' literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills. The literacy tasks included reading prose and reading documents.

The survey developers used a 500 point scale to rate the complexity of reading tasks. This scale was divided into 5 levels of reading proficiency.<sup>6</sup> In Canada, it is generally suggested that adults need level three skills in order to "participate fully in the knowledge economy."<sup>7</sup> According to the 2003 survey, 42% of Canada's working age population has reading skills below level three. (See also page 2 in this package.)

2. What is the percentage of adults in Alberta with low literacy?  
10% 19% 27% 35%

35% (750,000) of adult Albertans scored below level three.

3. Literacy means being able to read and write.

True but, but reading and writing are not "either/or" skills. People may be able to read well enough for some situations and have challenges in other instances.

4. Adult Literacy is the responsibility of the educational system.

False. Literacy is everyone's responsibility. Statistics show that only 5 – 10% adults who have literacy challenges go to adult literacy classes. Many adults are not in adult literacy classes, but they may be coming to community agencies. Literacy friendly environments can make it easier for all people to access agency services and resources.

There are links between having low levels of literacy, employment and income. Low income is related to many challenges, including health, housing, nutrition and access to transportation.

5. Most adults with low literacy in Canada are immigrants

False. The International Adult Literacy survey shows that of the 3.1 million at Level 1, 1.4 million are immigrants. Of the 5.8 million at level 2, 1.2 million are immigrants. The highest group for low literacy is seniors who either didn't

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<sup>6</sup> A Frontier College summary of the International Adult Literacy and Skills Survey (IALSS) 2003. Retrieved April 30, 2010 from <http://www.nald.ca/library/research/frontier/ialss03/cover.htm>

<sup>7</sup> International survey of reading skills. The Daily. Statistics Canada Retrieved April 30, 2010 from <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/080109/dq080109a-eng.htm>

gain the skills in youth or are losing the skills with lack of use. However, immigrants do have high rates of low-level literacy. Many immigrants now have a higher standard of education but do not speak English or French. As well, higher percentages of Aboriginal people have lower levels of literacy.

6. School completion ensures that a person will have strong literacy skills.

False. While it is true that individuals with more years of formal education are less likely to experience low literacy, 20% of Albertans at the lowest literacy level do have some post secondary education. Also, people's skills decline if they are not used.

## Appendix 2. Literacy Alberta Criteria for Creating a Literacy Friendly Environment<sup>8</sup>

Check the boxes as appropriate to your agency:

- A = We are already doing this
- B = We are doing this but could make improvements
- C = We are not currently doing this
- N/A = Not applicable to our agency situation

| SERVICE DELIVERY  | A | B | C | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|-----|
| Office Environment  |   |   |   |     |
| 1. Our reception area is clearly marked.  |   |   |   |     |
| 2. The atmosphere in our reception area is friendly. People feel they can ask for help without embarrassment.   |   |   |   |     |
| 3. We provide a quiet, private space for clients to fill out forms or participate in interviews.  |   |   |   |     |
| Application Procedures  |   |   |   |     |
| 4. We offer all clients the same help and choices.  |   |   |   |     |
| 5. We have carefully pared down our application or admission procedures so we get the essential information at the first meeting and the details at subsequent meetings.  |   |   |   |     |
| 6. We ask all clients if they need access to a translator/interpreter <sup>9</sup> in order to use our services, or if they have a preferred translator/interpreter whom they like to use.  |   |   |   |     |
| 7. We accommodate clients who may want or need to bring friends, Elders, or spokespersons to their meetings with our staff.   |   |   |   |     |
| 8. We ask all clients how they would like to receive information from us. (Such as through a verbal conversation, via written materials, online, via e-mail, via video or audiotape/CD, through a demonstration, etc.)              |   |   |   |     |
| 9. We have the same information available in visual, written, and auditory forms as relevant to our clients' needs. (Such as audiotapes/CDs, videos, posters, pamphlets, touch screen technology, online interactive formats, etc.) |   |   |   |     |

<sup>8</sup> This checklist is from *Opening doors. A literacy audit tool kit for customer service excellence*. Calgary, AB: Literacy Alberta. It is included with permission from Literacy Alberta.

<sup>9</sup> Translators provide written translations of text from one language to another. Interpreters provide oral translations of speech from one language to another.

|   |  |  |  |  |
|---|--|--|--|--|
| 10. We offer clients various ways to fill in a form or access our services. (Such as in person, by personal interview, by phone interview, via an online form from our website, by e-mail attachment, etc.)   |  |  |  |  |
| 11. Our website has clear, easy-to-follow instructions on how to fill out, print, and send forms to us.   |  |  |  |  |
| 12. We explain, in plain language, each point in our consent forms to ensure informed consent.  |  |  |  |  |
| 13. We use various methods to orient clients to our services. (Such as videos, learning circles, small group orientations, one-on-one orientations, etc.)   |  |  |  |  |
| 14. We regularly ask our clients for feedback about the quality and effectiveness of our services and application processes.  |  |  |  |  |
| Communicating with Clients  |  |  |  |  |
| 15. We use a welcoming, respectful tone when speaking with all of our clients.  |  |  |  |  |
| 16. With each initial client interaction, we provide a brief overview of our services, giving only the essential information.   |  |  |  |  |
| 17. At subsequent appointments, we review with all clients the information gathered at the previous appointment(s) to check our mutual understanding.   |  |  |  |  |
| 18. We use gestures, body language, drawings, models and demonstrations to enhance our communication with clients.  |  |  |  |  |
| 19. When appropriate, we learn second language equivalents for some of the English key words which describe our services. (For example, if there are many Spanish speakers in your community, you will ask a translator/interpreter, or bilingually fluent co-worker or client to help you translate the key words into Spanish.) |  |  |  |  |
| 20. When using an interpreter, we are careful to focus on the client as we interact, not the interpreter.   |  |  |  |  |
| 21. When using an interpreter, we leave additional time for the client to ask questions or ask to have information repeated.  |  |  |  |  |
| 22. We offer the interpreter breaks during appointments to ensure the optimum level of language translation.  |  |  |  |  |

| CLEAR PRINT MATERIALS  | A | B | C | N/A |
|--|---|---|---|-----|
| Plain Language   |   |   |   |     |
| 1. Our print materials use a personal tone (using “I”, “you,” “we”, etc.) to engage the reader.  |   |   |   |     |
| 2. When possible, we avoid the use of acronyms <sup>10</sup> and abbreviations in our print materials. If they are used, they are spelled out in full every few pages.   |   |   |   |     |
| 3. Where appropriate, our print materials use a simple question and answer format to convey information.   |   |   |   |     |
| 4. We keep paragraphs short (one idea per paragraph) and few in number in our print materials.   |   |   |   |     |
| 5. We attach plain language summaries to information and forms which contain mandated legal and technical language.  |   |   |   |     |
| 6. We regularly ask our clients for feedback on the readability <sup>11</sup> of our print materials.  |   |   |   |     |
| 7. We regularly consult with people outside our office for feedback on the print materials we prepare for the general public.  |   |   |   |     |
| 8. When we have print materials translated, we always ask a fluently bilingual client, staff or community member to review it for faithfulness to the original text <sup>12</sup> and appropriate tone for the audience. |   |   |   |     |
| 9. As appropriate, we have our print materials available in large print and other languages.   |   |   |   |     |
| Formatting & Design  |   |   |   |     |
| 10. We do not use glossy paper for any of our print materials. (Glossy paper creates a glare which is difficult to read for those with reading difficulties or low vision.)  |   |   |   |     |
| 11. We use bulleted lists, where appropriate, instead of long paragraphs in our print materials.   |   |   |   |     |
| 12. We avoid the use of ALL-CAPS or <i>italicized</i> print.   |   |   |   |     |
| 13. We use 12 point or larger fonts in our print materials.  |   |   |   |     |
| 14. The formatting of our print materials is limited to 2 standard font styles and sizes. (Such as Times New Roman 12 point font, or Arial 12 point font.)   |   |   |   |     |

<sup>10</sup> Acronyms – a series of letters taken from a term or name which is used in place of the term or name; for instance, CPR is the acronym for the term cardiopulmonary resuscitation and for the name Canadian Pacific Railway

<sup>11</sup> Readability – a measure of how easy or difficult a piece of text is to read

<sup>12</sup> Text – any piece of writing which contains words and/or numbers

| CLEAR PRINT MATERIALS   | A | B | C | N/A |
|---|---|---|---|-----|
| 15. Our print materials are designed with lots of white space to provide relief from print. (Such as wider margins, space between sections of text, 1.5 line spacing, etc.) |   |   |   |     |
| 16. Our print materials use simple, realistic line drawings to illustrate key points only.  |   |   |   |     |
| 17. We put brief plain language captions beside or underneath drawings to reinforce the message.  |   |   |   |     |
| 18. To aid in readability, we do not crowd our printed materials with drawings or words.  |   |   |   |     |
| Forms   |   |   |   |     |
| 19. Our forms are organized in a logical way with one idea per question.  |   |   |   |     |
| 20. Our forms require only brief words, phrases or check boxes to complete each question.   |   |   |   |     |
| 21. The questions on our forms do not contain jargon or technical language which could be confusing to our clients.   |   |   |   |     |
| 22. As often as possible, our forms are no longer than 2 pages per form.  |   |   |   |     |
| 23. Instructions on our forms are placed immediately before the question to which they relate.  |   |   |   |     |