

COMMUNITY VOICES PROJECT

2023

SNAPSHOT

Clear Language Lab
at Literacy Works

about our work

Clear Language Lab at Literacy Works

The Clear Language Lab is a program of Literacy Works, a Chicago-based non-profit focused on two key areas:

- Strengthening the adult literacy field across Illinois and beyond
- Making clear, effective communication the norm in everyday systems using plain language practices

Formally launched in 2018, Clear Language Lab supports mission-driven organizations such as non-profits and government agencies. Our work prioritizes clear, effective communication at all levels within organizations. We believe equitable communication should be a given in a fair and just society.

Annually, we provide training, coaching, and consulting to nearly 1000 professionals from more than 200 organizations. We work with groups across Illinois and around the country who represent a variety of sectors including healthcare, legal aid, workforce development, human services, and others.

All of this work is deeply grounded by the members of our Community Voices Project. This report provides a snapshot of this aspect of our work in 2023.

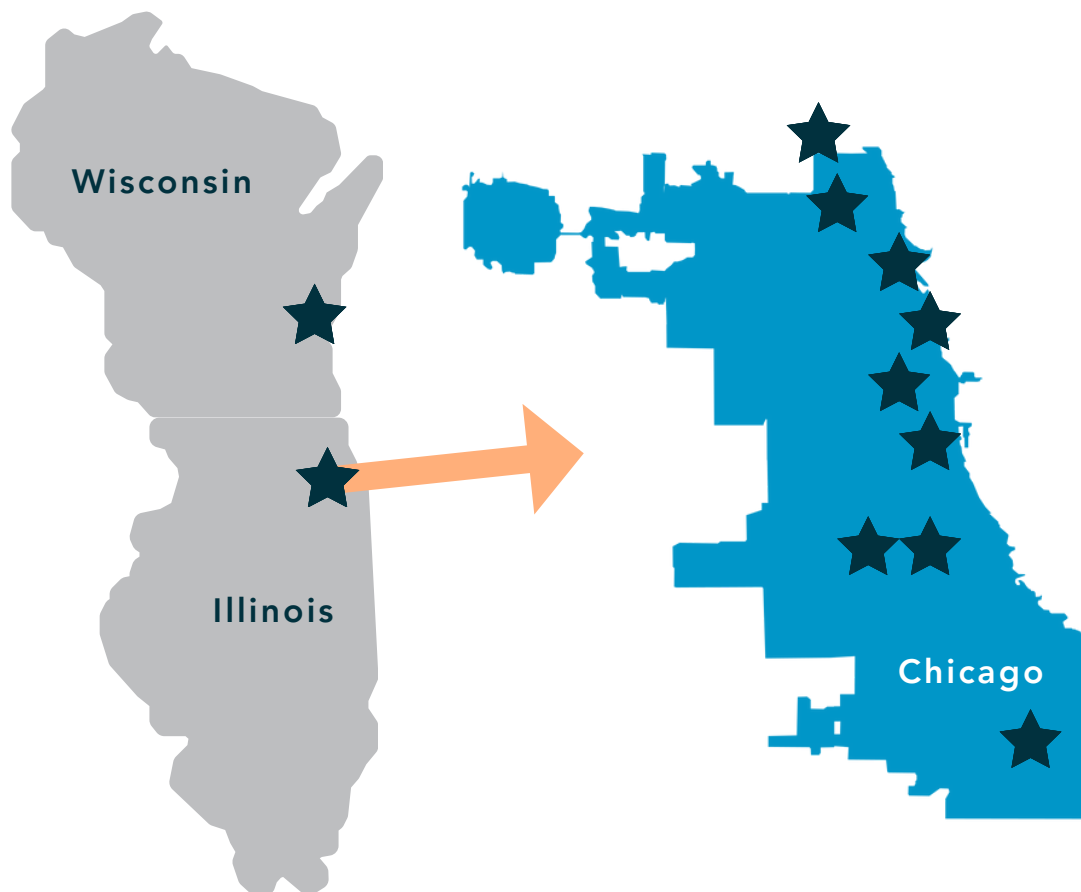
about the community voices project

How we find group members

We strive to create a space for the Community Voices Project that represents the rich diversity of the Chicagoland area and beyond.

We find participants in a number of ways:

- Through our adult education networks
- Through disability advocacy networks
- Through contacts of current members
- Through outside listening sessions



about the community voices project

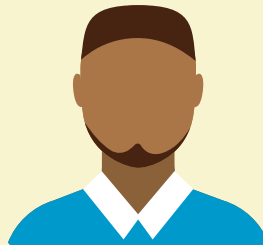
Creating a space to learn together

We strive to create an environment that represents the rich diversity of our community. Here's how different groups are represented in the Community Voices Project:

Age 50+
54%



Age 30s + 40s
31%



Age teens + 20s
15%



Identify as a person
of color
54%



Identify as a person
with a disability
46%



Identify as an immigrant
38%



how the project works

While we work with community members to make content work better for people, we don't consider the Community Voices Project to be a focus group.

Our group is intentionally **relationship-based**. We have found that by developing strong relationships, members feel comfortable sharing their opinions freely and without judgement.

We also take care to incorporate a number of lenses, identified below, to create spaces that feel safe, affirming, and strength-based.



Any time a member takes part in a group session, we provide a **\$25 thank you gift card** to a store of their choice.

Our members have a **high retention rate**. More than half of our current members have been involved for 2+ years.

what group members have to say

We asked our members how they would **describe the group** to a friend.

"We help these organizations to deliver their information in a clear, more easily accessible, and understandable way"

"A group to discuss the problems we have in our community in a friendly manner and brainstorm how we could improve it"

"It's a good group because anyone who works with the group can help their own community"

"[The group] tries to make a big difference in our community on the popular issues by collecting the constructive opinions from the people or group who live in the community"

"[The group] gathers community opinions and facilitate open dialogue and try to make things better in the community"

"A way to voice your opinion and ideals regarding community matters"

what group members have to say

We asked our members, “What makes effective communication?”

Clear Processes

“Make sure that all front line employees know the process and communicate that to a group or individuals”

“Find out how the person needs to receive information and then follow through in that way”

Accessibility

“I would make it so forms and websites are more accessible to a screen reader”

“Using language that is easier for us to understand, as well as making the information on the websites easily accessible”

Transparency

“To be patient when the initial understanding is not clear and provide further explanation ”

“Be open with every thing that is going on and happening”

Clear Main Ideas

“Start from the general to the details, not the other way around”

“Prioritize what...to write in such a way that the most important is the most visible and understandable”

Clear Wording

“SIMPLIFY the content without dumbing it down”

“I would suggest... using language that is easier for us to understand”

putting ideas into practice

Case study

In fall 2023, the Clear Language Lab began a project working with the Cook County Assessor's Office, providing plain language support for a major overhaul of the property tax reassessment letter and notice mailed across the county.

The rich discussions with the group members provided a number of insights that directly influenced the final document:

A brief overview with visuals that described the overall process

Definitions of important vocabulary

Alignment of the letter and the reassessment notice (not pictured)

Clearly labeled chart

Simplified lists and limited blocks of text

COOK COUNTY ASSESSOR'S OFFICE
118 North Clark St., Room 320
Chicago, IL 60602
312.443.7550
cookcountyassessor.com

Dear Homeowner,

The Cook County Assessor's Office reviews property values every 3 years in a process called reassessment. This is required by Illinois state law. The reassessment process helps make sure that all homeowners and business owners pay their fair share of the property taxes that help fund our communities. Our office is sending you this letter and Reassessment Notice because your home was reassessed this year. **This is not a bill, but it is very important to review this letter and the Reassessment Notice included.**

Here's how reassessments and the property tax system work:

- We use local real estate trends to update your property's market value (how much your property could sell for today).
- If you think the new market value is inaccurate or find an error on the Reassessment Notice, you have until the deadline to file an appeal.
- Your home's assessed value is 10% of its market value. Cook County uses the assessed value to calculate the property taxes billed in 2025.

Reassessments follow real estate trends

The median cost of homes in Chicago increased overall from 2019 to 2023. If home prices increased in your area, it can affect your home's market value, even if you didn't make changes to your home.

Learn more about property values in your area of Chicago at www.cookcountyassessor.com/valuation-reports.

Important terms used on the notice

Market Value: How much your home could sell for based on the current real estate market.	Assessed Value (AV): AV is 10% of your home's market value and is a factor used to calculate your taxes. It is NOT what you will owe in taxes.	Property Characteristics: Basic description of your home. Filing an Appeal: The way you report an issue with your assessment.	Exemption: Exemptions are property tax savings that homeowners may be eligible for based on certain criteria. Exemptions from past years are listed on the back of the notice.
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Common reasons to file an appeal

- The property characteristics listed on your notice are incorrect.
- The market value listed on your notice is more than 10% above what it could sell for today.
- You found comparable homes in your neighborhood that have lower market values.

Good news: appeals are down 20% in recent years as we continue to improve the accuracy of assessment.

How to file an appeal or learn more

You can file an appeal online or at our office locations. Filing is free and you do not need a lawyer to obtain a reduced assessment. Find more information about appeals and property tax exemptions on our website, by phone, or on social media. Our team is available to help at our offices in downtown Chicago, Markham, Skokie, and our newly reopened Bridgeview office.

Sincerely yours,
Fritz Kaegi
Fritz Kaegi
Cook County Assessor

Spanish | Polskim | 中文 | اللغة العربية

lessons learned along the way

#1 Sharing feedback

From last year's survey, we gleaned an important takeaway: group members want to know how the conversations we have impact the projects we work on.

Too often, community members aren't always privy to the impact their contributions have. This missing link can diminish their experience, leaving them disconnected from their impact of their contributions in the co-design process.

We implemented two key strategies that yielded positive feedback from participants:



- We **developed quarterly e-newsletters** that highlight members of the groups and include a short, informal video recap of recent happenings at the Clear Language Lab.



- We **started integrating updates into our monthly meetings** whenever possible. For example, we were able to share that the letter for the Cook County Assessor's Office was sent to 20,000+ people this spring with more to come. The group was thrilled to know that their feedback resulted in such a large impact.

lessons learned along the way

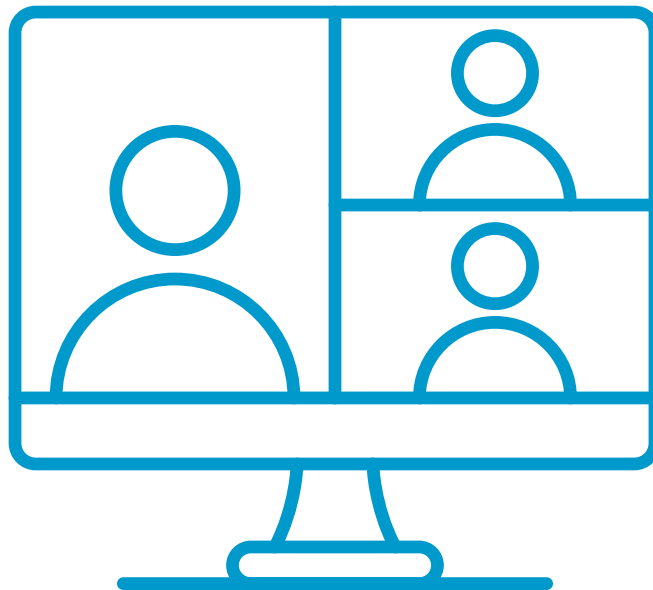
#2 Sharing knowledge

We recognize that creating groups that center community members can be a challenge for organizations for a variety of reasons.

To demystify what co-design can look like, we held a panel in June 2023 with 4 members of the Community Voices Project to share their own insights about the value of the group to them, including the relationship building prioritized by our team.



Check out [the recording of the webinar!](#)



Stay connected

You can...

- Take part in our Community of Practice
- Attend a training
- Check out resources
- Chat with us about your plain language needs

Contact

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at Literacy Works

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THANK YOU!

We want to
acknowledge all
the members of
our Community
Voices Project!

We appreciate all
your contributions!

You are a vital
part of the Clear
Language Lab!