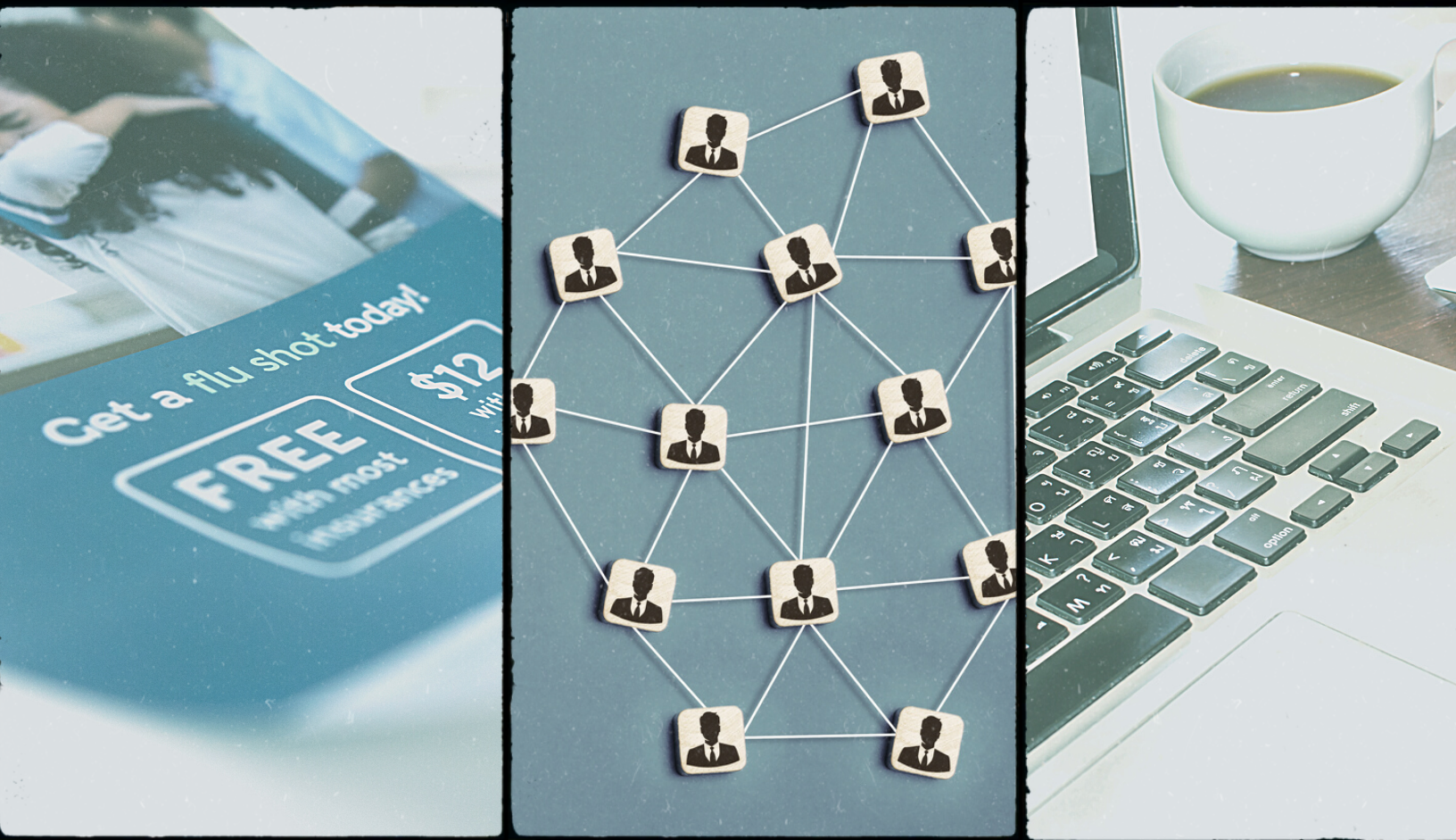




Literacy Works



Clear Language Lab
Community Voices Project

2022-23

SNAPSHOT

INTRODUCTION



The Clear Language Lab is a program of Literacy Works, a Chicago-based non-profit. Developed in 2018, the goal of the Clear Language Lab is to support mission-driven organizations such as non-profits, government bodies, and others in **prioritizing clear, effective communication** at all levels of their work.

Whether writing an email or making a flyer, whether in the legal aid sector or human services arena, equitable communication should be foundational in all of our work as we reach toward **a more fair and just society**.

We provide training, coaching, and consulting to more than 800 professionals annually from more than 150 organizations across varied sectors such as health care, legal aid, workforce development, human services, and others.

All of this work is influenced by our Community Voices Project. This report provides a snapshot of this aspect of our work.

Why the Need for Plain Language

Communication in non-profit and other public spaces is often:

- Not easy to navigate
- Not easy to understand (even if you can find what you are looking for)
- Not always tied to how actual processes work or offering clear action steps
- Not created with a lens of cultural humility or justness

Why? There are a number of reasons why clear communication is so mystifying in everyday public-facing communications:

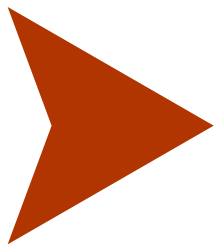
- Complex processes are hard to explain
- Staff lack relevant training in communication and technology
- It's often easy to lean on the status quo ("we've always done it that way")
- Unconscious bias impacts decisions, and oppressive practices become dominant norms
- Sometimes, systems are "broken" on purpose

For too long, legalese and bureaucratese have long been the norm. Let's reimagine communication that works for everyone.

WHY WE FORMED THE COMMUNITY VOICES GROUP

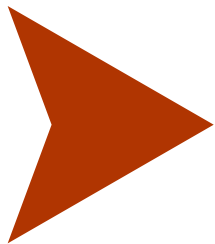
As adult educators, Literacy Works' staff come to this work with a deep understanding of the learning needs of adults. We also knew that it was important to us that our work is guided by the voices of community members who have been impacted by the inequity of our systems.

We also wanted to create a space that evoked the same environment we cultivated as adult education teachers. We wanted to craft an environment that:



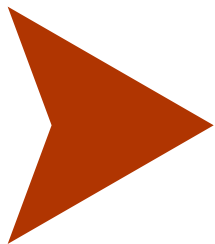
Dismantles Oppressive Norms

We acknowledge the inequitable practices that show up in communication and work to find solutions.



Amplifies Community Knowledge

We recognize that communities know what works - and we work to bring these perspectives to the forefront.



Centered Relationships

We work side by side with community members to learn together and create a trusting space for conversations.

Frameworks That Ground Our Work

There are several key frameworks that influence our work.

Framework	What It Is	How It Relates
Popular Education	A framework that ties learning to social change and works to challenge power differentials that often exist in traditional education systems.	We value relationship building and amplify the group's experiences and viewpoints in our work.
Design Justice	The Design Justice Network explains design justice "rethinks design processes, centers people who are normally marginalized by design, and uses collaborative, creative practices to address the deepest challenges our communities face."	Design is everywhere - even in that email, flyer, or report you are crafting. We align our work to <u>these principles</u> .
Trauma-Informed Practice	A human-services approach that recognizes the impact of trauma on people's bodies, brains, and lives, and works to create spaces of healing and well-being.	We handle subjects we talk about with care and give people choices about how much they want to engage on complex topics.
Cultural Humility	A recognition that our varied identities impact our work, and focuses on a perspective that emphasizes lifelong learning, critical reflection, and a desire to remedy power differentials that exist.	Whether we realize it or not, our identities influence the way we see the world. They influence the content matter we choose, the tone we imbue in our writing, and more.

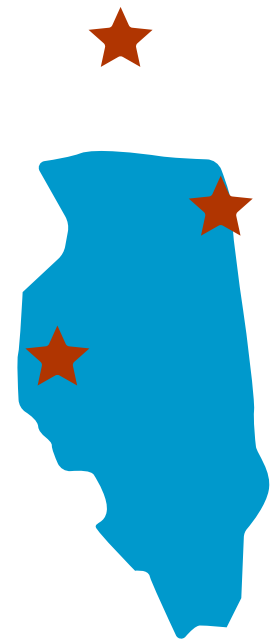
ABOUT THE COMMUNITY VOICES PROJECT MEMBERS

We sought participants through the channels we know - the adult education community, disability rights networks, and those who have experience with everyday systems. We wanted to be sure we had wide representation and diverse perspectives on the topics we approached.

We have a core group of 10-15 participants that participated multiple times over the last year. In FY 22, we had 65 touchpoints with 20 unique people. 11 participants responded to our first survey.

Who Is Represented

- About half the participants are 50 years or older, and about half younger than 50
- 10/11 respondents identified as a black, indigenous, or latinx person, or person of color, a person with a disability, and/or an English language learner
- Participants live in a variety of communities in and around Chicago including neighborhoods such as Rogers Park, Back of the Yards, and Roseland as well as Midwestern communities such as Moline, IL, and Milwaukee, WI



INSIGHTS

WHY PEOPLE TAKE PART

We asked Community Voice members to choose top reasons for being in the group.

I like making a difference in my community.

I like that you thank us for our time with a gift card. I feel appreciated being in the group.

I think it's important to advocate for a group I am a part of.

WHAT PEOPLE HAVE TO SAY

We asked Community Voice members about what works and doesn't work in everyday communications with non-profit and government officials.

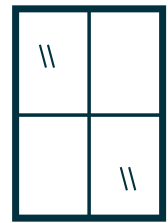
Some big themes popped out as important:



Active Listening



Empathy



Transparency



Making Time



Relationship Building

WHAT IS WORKING...

Here are some examples we heard explaining what works in everyday communications:

I have a good experience when I visited my doctor's office...Why? Because we have that connection. We have built that relationship...At the end of the day I feel good when I leave their office because I know I have everything that...I need from them to be able to keep going.

When I go to my advocacy meetings, they do a survey and listen to what we are all saying on the survey. That means something.

When I got to the supervisor, she realized what had happened and apologized. That to me makes all the difference.

We had a family meeting and the doctor explained things in doctor's terms and laymen's terms, and we could ask questions.

WHAT COULD BE BETTER...

Here are some examples we heard about what could be better in everyday communications:

Be patient with people. Some people don't understand big words or it's hard to understand some directions and it would help if people that work in government didn't get so frustrated with people.

I often feel like when it comes to nonprofits or governmental offices, people are often treated like numbers. Yes, like I said it, like numbers. We are human beings. We need to be treated with respect and dignity – the same respect you want from the public...I'm just a stranger but treat me with respect – that's all I ask.

Give more money so organizations could work at better capacity.

Listen more. Take time.
[Create] better websites.

NEXT STEPS

In 2023, we have several goals related to our Community Voices Project:

01

Develop a Community Voices newsletter

We know feedback loops are important - and we are in the process of developing a Community Voices Project newsletter to share updates and areas of interest for members.

02

Identify additional ways for Community Voices Project members to participate

We will work with the Community Voices Project members to understand how they want to contribute to this work further in the coming years.

03

Continue to champion communication equity and share practical ways to improve everyday communication across varied sectors

We will continue to identify the best ways to share opportunities for plain language education and training with the community at large.

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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**Special thank
you to all the
members of
our Community
Voices Project!
We are thrilled
to partner with
you all!**