

Florida is crafting a low literacy version of Farm*A*Syst/ Home*A*Syst in English and Spanish



Many state Farm*A*Syst and Home*A*Syst programs are reaching out to underserved audiences — securing grants and working with partners to reach Native American nations, inner city residents, Spanish-speaking populations and clients served by 1890 institutions. By this spring, Florida's modification of relevant Farm*A*Syst and Home*A*Syst topics for rural low-literacy and illiterate adults should be finished, according to Susan Williams, Florida's Home*A*Syst Coordinator.

The 14 one-page documents will be in the *Keep Your Well Water Clean* series. In addition to English, the documents have been translated into Spanish. English and Spanish video versions are in production for people who are unable to read.

"I came up with the idea (of a low-literacy version) because I realized the materials we did for Florida Farm*A*Syst would be way above the reading level of a lot of people in the state," Williams explains. "After we did Home*A*Syst and got this (EPA 319) low-literacy grant, I realized that it was out of reach of a lot of poor readers, also. I felt there were probably a lot of those out there that had wells and they needed to be exposed to some of this information to help them protect their wells from contamination."

Williams says that since she's never done this kind of work before, she hired a consultant, Bonnie Salazar, to review the documents after modification and to pretest them with the target audiences.

"I had no idea how to write on a third-grade or fifth-grade reading level," Williams says. "Bonnie gave a presentation at a training session last year about presenting and preparing materials for the very audiences that we wanted to reach on this project. She's been a blessing because she knows about pretesting. I knew nothing about it, although I know more than I used to."

Tips

Williams has some tips to share with those who are going through this process with their own state's materials.

"I have a word list that I can send (to Home*A*Syst state coordinators) and there are two books that I've found really helpful," she says. *The Basic Dictionary of American English Usage* by Contemporary Books is written expressly for adults who are learning how to read. And I can't say enough good things about *Teaching Patients with Low Literacy Skills* by Doak, Doak and Root. It is outstanding. I've certainly used it to help me write the documents."

Reaching this audience

As a Certified Health Education Specialist, Salazar is used to preparing material for adults.

"I think that the most important message is that it is feasible to reach this audience," Salazar says. "I think that so many times people feel overwhelmed at even thinking about doing anything to reach people without literacy skills, because they just have so little experience and training in how to do that. To have someone like Susan — who didn't know anything about how to reach this audience — to be ambitious enough to work on a project like this should give some hope to other people that it is possible.

"In a way it's good that Bonnie didn't know about (what) we're writing about, because she could look at it a lot more objectively," Williams says.

Public health

Salazar says, "The content area is obviously something that public health has focused on from the very beginning in looking at safe water and sanitary conditions. But often times those who are most effected by public health programs are what we would consider the hard-to-reach audiences. And certainly people with literacy problems would fall into that category because they often times can't be reached or can't comprehend the typical types of health education materials that are distributed.

"This type of project is certainly critical from a public health perspective, in that it can be used as a springboard for all kinds of public health programs," she adds.



Dorothy Washington takes a water sample.

Excerpted from Farm and Home Pollution Prevention Update, Sept. 1998