



South Carolina Institute of
Medicine & Public Health

SOUTH CAROLINA OFFICE OF
RURAL HEALTH

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POLICY BRIEF | APRIL 2024

Utilizing Community Health Workers to Promote Health Literacy in Lee County

About the South Carolina Institute of Medicine and Public Health

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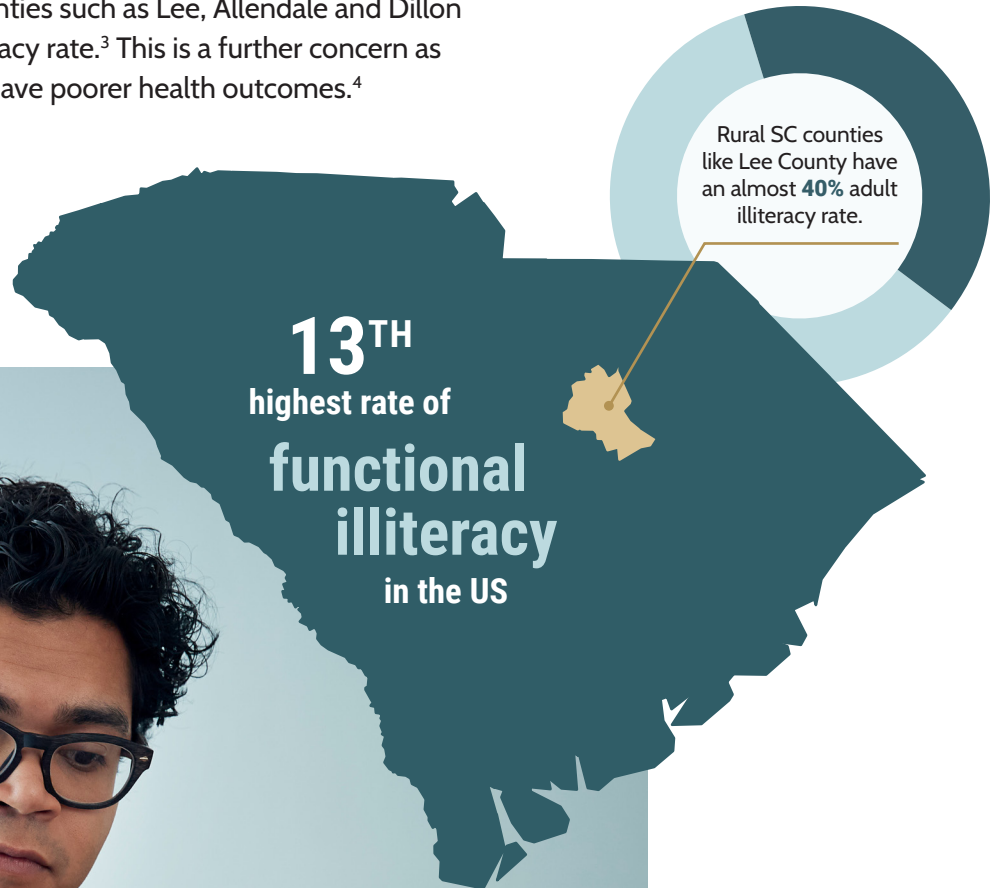
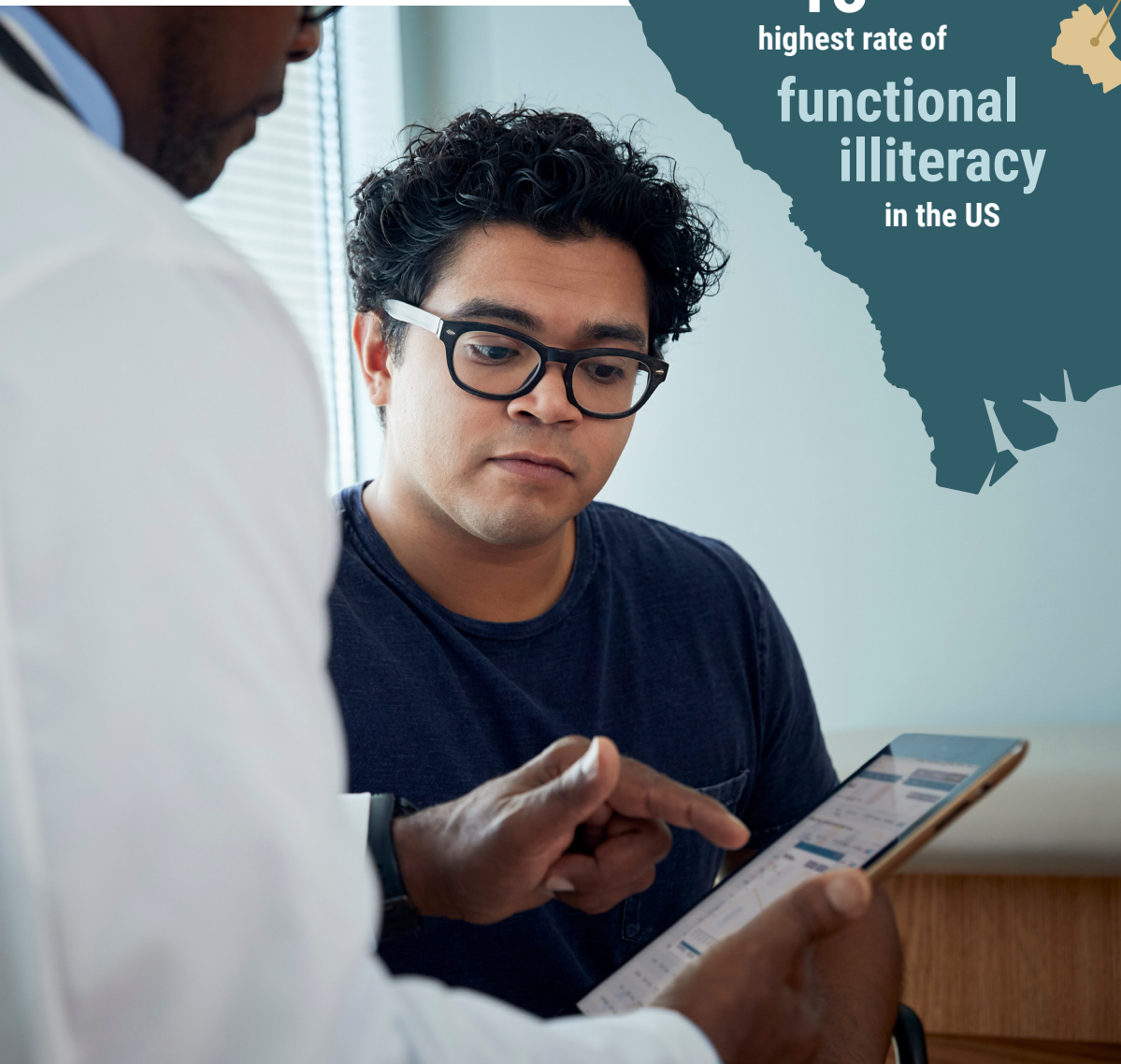
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Introduction

Health literacy, according to the Centers for Disease Control, is an individual's ability to find and understand information or services to inform their health-related decisions and actions.¹ The ability to understand a diagnosis and treatment plan is crucial to effective patient care, however many individuals can find themselves lost among the wide variety of information, options and medical jargon used within the field. In addition, South Carolina has the 13th highest rate of functional illiteracy in the US,² with rural counties such as Lee, Allendale and Dillon having an almost 40% adult illiteracy rate.³ This is a further concern as patients with lower literacy rates have poorer health outcomes.⁴

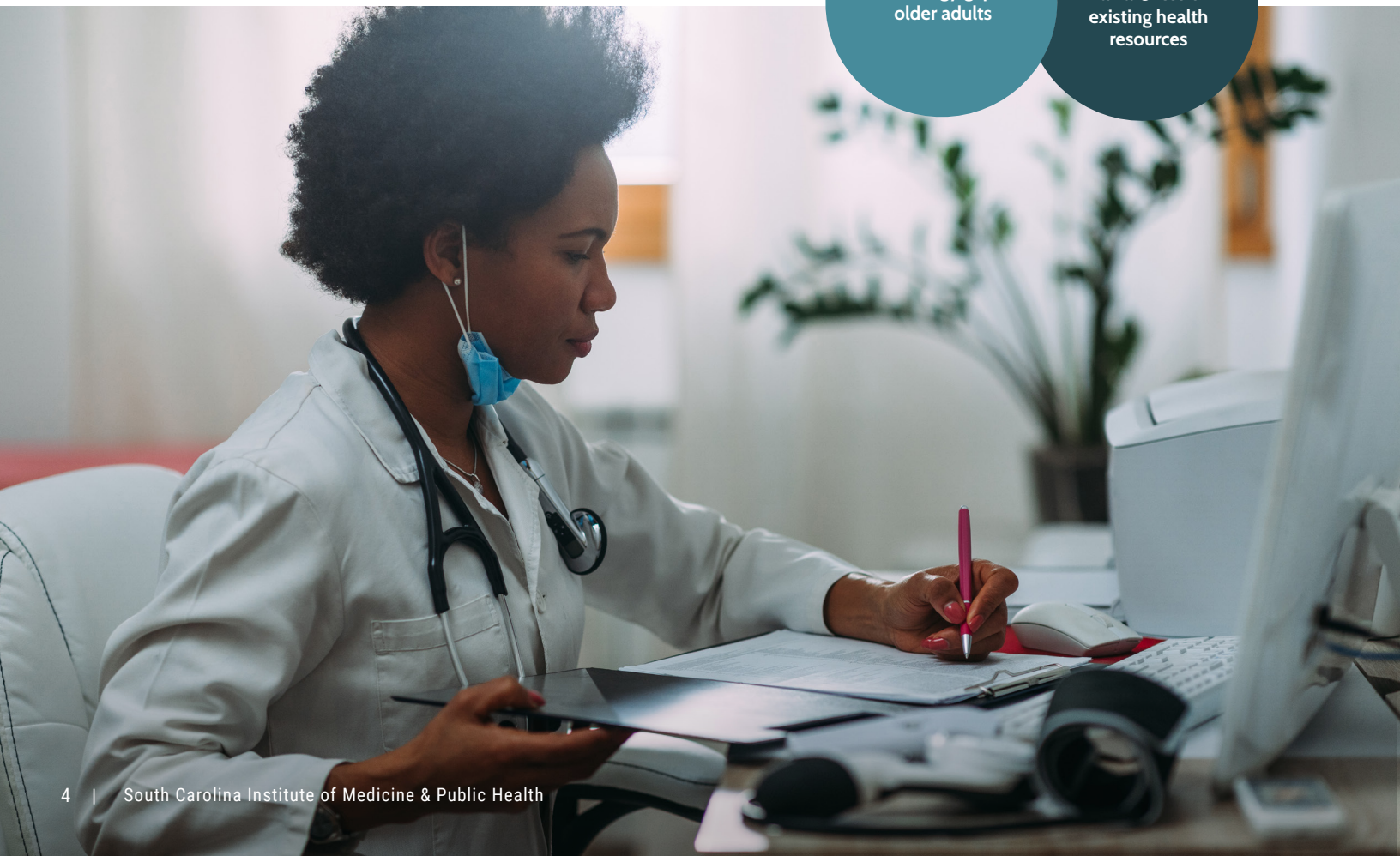
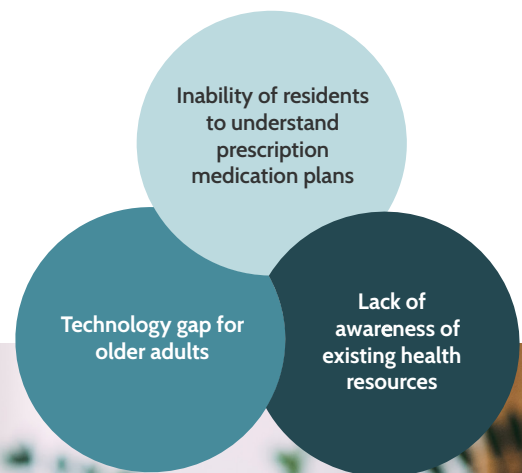


Community leaders in Lee County recognize health literacy as a pressing issue among its residents, a problem exacerbated by the lack of health resources and limited literacy rates in the county. Currently, only one hospital (Central Carolina Hospital) exists in the county, forcing many residents to cross county lines to access care. The biggest literacy gaps within the county include the inability of residents to understand prescription medication plans, the technology gap for older adults and general lack of awareness of existing health resources in the area.

Lee County is prioritizing increasing access to health centers and working to increase health literacy among communities through partnerships with local community centers. This includes working with local libraries to implement health programming in effort to increase literacy rates. While these programs are a step in the right direction, community leaders have noted a historical lack of trust between residents and their local officials, making it less likely that these efforts will have meaningful impact.

Health literacy challenges are especially prevalent among rural counties such as Lee County, and it could be beneficial for officials to look to other counties to discover possible solutions to implement. Surrounding counties such as Georgetown and Orangeburg have had similar issues with medical literacy and access to care and have benefitted greatly from the use of Community Health Workers (CHWs) when creating health programming and implementing strategies within their communities.

Biggest Health Literacy Gaps in Lee County



Community Health Workers

CHWs are frontline public health workers who partner with local organizations to create and implement programs which increase health education within their communities. CHWs can individualize solutions to their communities, allowing individuals to have an approachable point of contact with whom they can discuss health-related issues.

CHWs have the biggest impact when they are members of the community they serve. This allows them to have a unique and in-depth understanding of the state of health within the area and the causes of current health issues. CHWs who have grown up and/or live in the area can also connect more with community members, allowing them to build trust with patients.

In addition, CHWs are aware of the current state of health care within their area and the health-related resources that exist within the county. Often, current resources that exist within communities are not fully utilized because residents are unaware they exist or do not trust they will make a difference. This is another issue that can be addressed through CHWs, as they can help educate and connect communities to current resources and build back community members' trust in the system. CHWs are able to convey complex ideas through simple terms, making engagement with health care more accessible to community members.

The majority of CHWs that currently work in the state are hired through private organizations, however counties such as Greenwood, Orangeburg and Georgetown are beginning to hire them through county level government agencies. Hiring CHWs at a county level can help build connections between residents and their government agencies, while also creating trust in current health systems.

CareSouth Carolina is currently one of the only organizations in SC who have hired Community Health Workers to improve health education and access to their services. This organization is a Federally Qualified Health Center, meaning it serves high-need communities and is governed by a board of directors.⁵ Current CareSouth Carolina outreach teams help increase health screenings, compile needs and resources assessment data for communities and facilitate community input through focus groups and public forums.⁶



In Lee County, CareSouth Carolina's CHWs have developed a food pantry which not only offers healthy options but also allows community members to speak with CHWs about nutrition and diets. In addition to this, many CHWs partner with public libraries in Lee County to increase both health and overall literacy rates within communities.



Private health organizations also utilize CHWs to make health topics easier to understand and increase their ability to connect with community members. Welvista, a nonprofit that increases access to health services among underserved communities in South Carolina, uses CHWs to work individually with residents to help them understand prescriptions and bridge the technology gap that exists for many older adults.⁷

The South Carolina Community Health Worker Association also provides resources and professional development for current CHWs and organizations that support them. In addition to this, they provide resources for the education and training of new CHWs and advocate for the importance of these individuals within South Carolina's counties.⁸



Conclusion

Increasing the use of community health workers in rural areas such as Lee County can help bridge the gap between health centers and patients, overall increasing access to preventative medicine and resources. The lack of access to health centers within Lee County has heightened medical literacy and health education issues among communities, but CHWs could help bridge this gap by bringing resources to communities that currently lack access. Health should be a priority for local leaders, and by increasing the reach of CHWs through both government and private institutions, county and municipal government can more effectively address the needs of communities. By providing access to health education, counties can give individuals the tools they need to more effectively manage their own health needs.

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Increasing the use of **community health workers** can help **bridge the gap** between health centers and patients.





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