

RURAL CAMPAIGN ON ILLITERACY:

THE REGION, THE TECHNICAL INSTITUTES AND THE LIBRARIES

Georgie Klevar
Coordinator, Adult Basic Education
Northeast Iowa Technical Institute
Calmar, Iowa

and

Mary Anne Smith
Administrator
Northeastern Iowa Regional Library System
Waterloo, Iowa

It is no secret that America is faced with a serious national illiteracy problem. Statistics show that 23 million American adults (about 1 in 5) cannot read or write well enough to cope in everyday life. These people are functionally illiterate, and the number of adult illiterates is growing, by approximately 2 1/2 million per year.

For purposes of clarification, "functional illiteracy" refers to the adult who cannot use basic reading, writing, and computational skills in everyday life situations. Thus, a functionally illiterate adult perhaps cannot:

- read street or highway signs
- use a phone book
- read a menu
- fill out a job application
- use a bus schedule
- make correct change for a twenty-dollar bill

The annual costs of illiteracy to each of us are high. Estimates vary, but one figure often cited is that the taxpayer

pays five billion dollars annually for welfare and unemployment compensation. Other costs affecting us all include those for crime and prison, for unearned tax revenues, and for lost productivity in business and in the military.

Iowans for many years have rested confidently in their belief that 99 percent of the state's population could read and write competently. An estimate for a ten-county area served by one particular Adult Basic Education (ABE) program is that there are 10,000 functionally illiterate adults within those boundaries.

Adults are not getting the help they need to learn the basic skills which are necessary to participate fully in American society. Only two to four percent of adult illiterates enroll in any literacy program. There is a great need to increase public awareness of the pervasive problem.

The Coordinators of Adult Basic Education at two vocational-technical institutes and the Administrator of a regional library system in Northeast Iowa decided to expand their history of cooperative programming. They would use County library meetings as a vehicle for educating librarians, staff, and trustees in the problems of illiteracy and in roles that they can play in helping to fight those problems.

The Northeast Iowa Regional Library System, located in Waterloo, is composed of 82 predominantly rural libraries in 13 counties. The libraries range in size from cities with a population of 106 to a population of 75,000. The Region provides interlibrary loan and reference back-up service, as well as one-on-one consulting, and continuing

education opportunities in the form of seminars, workshops, and roundtables.

The Hawkeye Institute of Technology, located in south Waterloo on a 320-acre campus, strives to provide vocational-technical training to prepare, retrain, or upgrade people for employment in their chosen fields. A vital part of the Institute is its downtown Success Center, which also includes ABE, High School Completion, and an Independent Learning Center.

Northeast Iowa Technical Institute (NITI) came into being in the late 1960's, as did Hawkeye Institute. The Calmar Campus lies in Northeast Iowa, about 25 miles south of the Minnesota border. Early in 1970 the South Campus was formed and is now located at Peosta, ten miles west of Dubuque. Both Campuses have continuing education programs which include the ABE and the Adult Re-Entry Program, in addition to the full curriculum of vocational and technical offerings. There is also a Learning Center in downtown Dubuque.

The 13 counties of the regional library system overlap the jurisdictions of both Hawkeye Institute and NITI. Ten of those counties have Library Associations which meet regularly in April and October.

It was the intent of the Coordinators and the Administrator to help library staff members and trustees realize that their facilities were perfect non-threatening areas suitable to be used as tutoring sites, that libraries can keep special collections of materials available, and that librarians and staff are perhaps the most likely persons to be aware

of potential tutors as well as of those who might need to be tutored. In short, this was to be a consciousness-raising effort.

It was decided that a 20-25 minute program would be ample time to present the problem, state the case, and leave time for questions and discussions. This would be done by the ABE Coordinators where possible, and by the Regional Administrator and/or Consultant as substitutes. They also decided that visuals and graphics, as well as handouts, would be most effective as a means of solidly imprinting the ideas presented.

The cooperation of B. Dalton Booksellers was also sought. It is well-known that the company is involved in a National Literacy Initiative. A call to a local outlet yielded gracious and generous help. B. Dalton provided several large posters, bookmarks and pencils to distribute to those attending the county library meetings. Should a B. Dalton outlet be unavailable, there are a number of other companies which are also involved in the literacy effort.

During the first round of visits in spring 1985, to county meetings, the ABE Coordinators used a slide series prepared by another community college. This five-minute presentation stated the problems of illiteracy in Iowa, explained the tutor training process, and showed volunteer tutors assisting three different students.

In July 1985 a second planning session was held with the Regional Administrator, the Consultant, and two ABE Coordinators. The MacNeil-Lehrer report had just aired

a program on illiteracy which included segments on two Iowa students and the ABE Coordinator from Hawkeye Institute of Technology. This excellent videotape presented the individual stories of Iowans who needed help in learning to read. Personal testimony has a strong impact, so this videotape was used as a follow-up motivator at the 1985 fall meetings. For a few groups this was their first presentation since they met only on an annual basis.

The trustees and librarians were all very receptive to the videotape, but the group in Clayton County was particularly enthusiastic. One of the trustees had been a reading teacher and another had taken Laubach Literacy training. Several people asked questions and expressed a willingness to help. The NITI Coordinator then decided that this was a good core from which to plan a training session.

Eight volunteers turned out on a spring morning for the workshop held at the Monona Public Library. The trainer covered these topics: the problem of illiteracy in America, the process of learning to read, and basic instructional techniques. The ABE Coordinator discussed qualities needed for a tutor, the tutor-student relationship, the requirements for a tutor to follow, and materials available at NITI for a poor reader. The tutors eagerly participated in the activities, which included learning to read with a mock alphabet and phonics set. The participants learned the principles of reading instruction, some simple diagnostic techniques, and reading interests. They prepared a sample lesson using case studies. By the end of the five hours, the potential

tutors had received a basic training course in how to help someone learn to read. The slogan for the day was "The only degree you need is a degree of caring." These volunteers are now being matched with students who need help.

Future plans are to hold demonstration workshops in three sites in the Region so that library staff can observe tutors being trained and also watch a mock session where a tutor will work with a poor reader. At these sessions there will also be a demonstration collection of ABE materials, a reading/buying list, and a display of promotional materials used to recruit potential tutors and students. Hopefully this will yield additional volunteers to help in the fight against illiteracy.

Another consciousness-raising tool used was the submission of articles to the region's newsletter, which is mailed to 265 librarians and trustees. More articles are being prepared so that the topic will stay in front of the librarians and trustees.

Illiteracy in this country didn't happen overnight, and the problem will take time to solve. With this in mind the Regional Administrator and ABE Coordinators know that their efforts need to continue.