

Community Foundation Launches Literacy Initiative

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By Todd Lueders, President/CEO

For the first time in its 60-year history, the Community Foundation has taken on the leadership of a multi-year, multi-million dollar project to address one of the county's most pressing needs: **literacy**. Over the next five years, in partnership with the Monterey Peninsula Foundation and other funders, the Community Foundation will direct grants to a wide variety of community-based, private non-profit, public, and possibly workplace programs that offer literacy services to adults between 18 and 35, especially those with young children.

We didn't pluck this idea out of thin air. In fact, we surveyed dozens of providers, researched existing surveys and needs assessments, and met with many county department heads to identify a cross-cutting community need that affects the quality of life of individuals and families regardless of their economic status.

Here's what we found. Although there are many successful and long-term efforts underway to promote literacy (such as homework centers, pre-school programs, and others), low literacy is still a barrier to success for thousands of young adults and for many children entering kindergarten. According to recent studies, only 54% of our children entering kindergarten have the necessary pre-academic skills. Among Monterey County's adult workforce, 25% read below the 4th grade level, and only 68% have completed high school. Overall, 55% of adults seeking services (such as education or health care) say their inability to speak English is a barrier, and 11% of the adults in the county are not literate in any language.

The next step in our Literacy Initiative will be to convene a variety of expert and audience panels to help the Foundation and other funders identify the criteria for a new grants program. We want to know what educators, librarians, employers, civic leaders and families feel are the most promising practices and the areas of greatest need, especially for adults who are also parents and for whom spoken and written literacy in English and/or Spanish is holding them back from success as workers and parents.

Another goal of the Initiative will be to raise community awareness of the need for improved literacy levels. We will be developing a series of public service announcements, media campaigns, and non-traditional methods of reaching both service providers and those who need services. By identifying worthy programs that need to be expanded or strengthened, and employers or industries that have a commitment to expanding the literacy levels of their employees, and by committing substantial grants to these efforts from multiple sources, we expect to make a measurable and sustainable change in the literacy levels of hundreds if not thousands of Monterey County residents.

The Initiative is being led by a Task Force chaired by Diane Cordero de Noriega, the Interim President of CSU Monterey Bay, and coordinated by the Foundation's Senior Program Officer, Jeff Bryant (jeff@cfmco.org, 375-9712 ext. 14). The Community Foundation itself has already committed to set aside over \$1,250,000 from our unrestricted funds for the Initiative over the next five years, and we welcome the participation of other foundations, corporations, civic groups, and individual donors who share our belief in the importance of this effort.

America is a richer and more vibrant country because we have welcomed new citizens from every corner of the globe since the mid-19th century. That tradition is expected to continue and even accelerate in the 21st century. So whether you notice your local adult school has its lights on late at night with students who were born in Bosnia, El Salvador, Mexico, South Korea or right here in the United States, you can bet that they are all there for the same reason: they want to learn to read, write, and speak effectively so that they can get a better job or help their young children do well in school.

The Community Foundation believes we can and should do more for those who share that dream.