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National Health Education Week 2011 Sets Focus on Improving Health Literacy: Communications Kit and Webinar Available to Organizations

WASHINGTON, DC– This year’s National Health Education Week (NHEW), taking place from October 16-22, will be themed *Health Literacy: Gateway to Improving the Public’s Health*. The week calls attention to the importance of health literacy and the critical role health education specialists and advocates can play in health literacy promotion and improved national health. Health literacy is the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health information and services needed to make appropriate health decisions. It has a large impact on health service delivery and the attendant costs.

In the United States, a significant gap exists between the high-reading levels of most health materials and the limited literacy skills of many adults.¹ Only 12 percent of consumers have proficient health literacy skills, which mean that nearly nine out of ten adults may lack the skills needed to manage their health and prevent disease. To address this issue, , the Society for Public Health Education (SOPHE) will host a free webinar with national health literacy experts, offer a free Health Literacy Tool Kit, and sponsor themed activities and resources throughout the week.

“Today’s complex health system and the overwhelming amount of health information available make it difficult for consumers to understand written health materials and access health services,” states Elaine Auld, MPH, MCHES, Chief Executive Officer of SOPHE. “Health literacy, or the lack thereof, cross cuts all populations and education levels and takes a tremendous toll on individuals, as well as businesses and communities.”

Deficiencies in national health literacy impact our nation’s physical – and financial – health. One study estimates the cost of limited health literacy to the Nation’s economy to be \$106 and \$236 billion U.S. dollars annually.² “Improving health literacy of children, youth, adults and the elderly is critical to improving the personal health of individuals as well as the economic health of our nation,” says Diane Allensworth, PhD, Past President of SOPHE.

In order to address these concerns, SOPHE has developed the NHEW Tool Kit to help individuals, organizations, and communities develop campaigns that promote health literacy as a public health problem and the need for organizational and institutional changes to improve health literacy. Campaign planners can use this guide to plan activities throughout the year and evaluate the success of their initiatives. As a way to facilitate discussion on health literacy SOPHE will also present a free skills

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¹ Kutner, M., Greenberg, E., Jin, Y., & Paulsen, C. (2006). *The Health Literacy of America’s Adults: Results from the 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion. (2010). *National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

building webinar on Thursday, October 20 at 2:00 p.m. EST. CommunicateHealth co-founders Stacy Robison, MPH, MCHES and Xanthi Scrimgeour, MEd, MCHES will be among the panelists to discuss strategies to evaluate and improve your health education materials to meet the needs of your population.

Additionally, factsheets, activities and resources will coincide with a special subject for each day of NHEW, including:

- Monday: Get to Know the *National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy*
- Tuesday: Schools: Integrating Health Literacy into Curriculum Early Childhood through Secondary
- Wednesday: Healthcare Systems: Practice Changes to Improve Health Literacy
- Thursday: Seniors: Health Literacy and Healthy Aging
- Friday: Public Health: A Population-Based Approach to Health Literacy Gap

All NHEW materials are available free of charge at www.sophe.org. Health education specialists, organizations and communities are encouraged to make additional copies and distribute them as needed. “SOPHE encourages health education and public health professionals to adapt and personalize the ideas and tools of this planning guide to fit the specific needs of their community,” states Daniel Perales, DrPH, MPH, President of SOPHE. “Additionally, the tool kit provides ideas on how to partner with other health education specialists in nonprofit organizations, government agencies, county and local health departments, academia, and other settings to increase health literacy efforts - not only during National Health Education Week, but also throughout the year.”

Health education specialists work to improve health literacy throughout the country. Louise Villejo of the MD Anderson Center of the University of Texas works with cancer patients and noted: “The diagnosis of cancer is overwhelming and patients need to learn about their disease, treatment and self-care.” She emphasized, “In this healthcare environment patients and their family members are expected to assume tremendous responsibility for treatment and follow-up care at home. They must understand and be able to complete their care at home.” Tammy Pilisuk, MPH, of the California Department of Public Health, said “Health educators have been at the forefront of pushing for better health literacy, mostly within their own organizations, agencies, or clinical settings. I believe that health literacy principles are important to help improve communications with ALL populations.”

National Health Education Week is recognized by the Department of Health and Human Services and is celebrated each year during the third week of October in an effort to focus national attention on a major public health issue, provide public education, and improve consumer understanding of health education’s role in promoting the public’s health.

SOPHE is a 501 (c)(3) professional organization founded in 1950 to provide global leadership to the profession of health education and health promotion and to promote the health of society. SOPHE is the only independent professional organization devoted exclusively to public health education and health promotion. Located in Washington, DC, SOPHE has more than 4,000 members and 19 chapters located throughout the United States, Western Canada and Northern Mexico. For more information, please visit www.sophe.org.

Available for Interviews. The following spokespeople are available for interviews concerning National Health Education Week, health literacy and SOPHE.

Daniel Perales, DrPH, MPH, President of SOPHE. Dr. Dan Perales received his BA degree from U.C. Berkeley and his MPH and DrPH degrees from the University of Texas School of Public Health. He is Professor of Public Health in the San Jose State University Department of Health Science and the MPH Programs' Distance Education Director. He teaches *Health Promotion Planning and Evaluation* in the SJSU MPH Program and *Social Marketing and Epidemiology* in the undergraduate program. Over the last 25 years, he has also conducted evaluations of programs related to tobacco control, adolescent pregnancy prevention, nutrition education and food security, child immunization, and coalition development and maintenance.

M. Elaine Auld, MPH, MCHES. Chief Executive Officer of the Society for Public Health Education since 1995. Ms. Auld directs the nation's only independent organization devoted to public health education and health promotion. She oversees the Society's portfolio of programs in professional development, research and advocacy on behalf of health education.

Please see accompanying backgrounder to this release.

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