The Hardest to Reach:

Why SMS might be a critical link between public health departments and the refugee community

Overview:

In December 2010, more than 20% of the King County population was foreign-born. Many foreign born residents are refugees who face complex challenges, particularly related to health. In an effort to offset those challenges, researchers at Public Health – Seattle & King County identified newly arrived refugees as a population that may benefit from text messages (SMS) as a vehicle to receive public health information.

To gauge feasibility for a text messaging program for the refugee population, Public Health researchers distributed a survey, translated into several languages, at the refugee clinic in downtown Seattle.

Key Findings:

- More than three-fourths of all survey participants indicated that they send and/or receive text messages.
- More than 56% of survey participants preferred receiving health information via text message, compared to phone calls, directly from a doctor or nurse, newspapers, from a social worker/case worker, and television.
- Surveyed refugees were most interested in receiving information about how to get medical care.
- English is the primary language used for texting among refugees.
- There are inherent cultural and technological challenges to the implementation of a text messaging program for refugees that should be considered during development.

Survey Methods:

- Administered over the course of 60 days at refugee clinics in Seattle
- Employed translated surveys and interpreters

Data collection:

- Collected 60 usable surveys
- Languages: English, Somali, Farsi, Arabic, Russian & Burmese

Conclusion:

There is evidence of substantial cell phone and text message use among the refugee population, sometimes on a daily or weekly basis. A text messaging program developed for this group would not reach everyone, but it would reach most people. Furthermore, because of the tight-knit nature of these communities, often built of people who depend on word-of-mouth communication, text messages received by cell phone owners may result in reach beyond the cell phone user. Text message receivers could function as a "hub" of information.

Public Health
Seattle & King County