

# New readers plead for program

■ Huntington Beach City Council is asked to step in to fill the void as federal funding expires

By Robert Barker, Staff Writer

HUNTINGTON BEACH — Declaring that learning to read has changed their lives forever, graduates of an adult literacy program have poured out their hearts in a citywide plea to keep the program going.

"It made me feel like I was worth something," one young woman told City Council members at a recent meeting. "I can read to my son and help him with his homework."

About 1,500 local residents have learned to read, thanks to one-on-one tutoring in The Literacy Volunteers of America program, which has operated out of the Huntington Beach Central Library for 11 years.

Program "graduates" find

good jobs, read to their children, go on to higher education and open a whole new world for themselves, literacy volunteers said.

The U.S. Department of Education will discontinue in September a \$35,000 grant that has funded the nearly all-volunteer operations.

Literacy graduates and advocates appeared before the City Council recently, asking the city to step in with financial help. The going may be hard, however, because of the county bankruptcy and declining revenue.

Library Director Ron Hayden said every effort will be made to scrape up money for such a far-reaching, cost-effective program.

Sharon Valdez, 28, who took tutoring sessions twice a week for a year, said she had been able to read only at the fifth-grade level but became "a pro of bluffing" and was passed from one grade to the next and received a high school diploma.

"Having my son turned my life around. I wanted to read stories to him and help him with his

homework," she said. Valdez signed up with the literacy program, and "it made me feel I was worth something."

"I went to school (the Regional Occupational Training Program) and passed with a B. I've been working for two years as a dental assistant.

"I am a woman who has confidence in herself. I'm a woman who will never stop learning. I am a woman who can read."

Bernadette "Bernie" Rothert 44, said English wasn't spoken at her home, and she could read only on a second- or third-grade level when she graduated from high school in Placer County.

"It's amazing the number of people who can't read," she said. "I told my sister about the literacy program (recently), and she didn't know I couldn't read."

Rothert said she brushed aside her embarrassment to speak up for the program at the City Council meeting. "If it helped one person, it's worth it," she said.

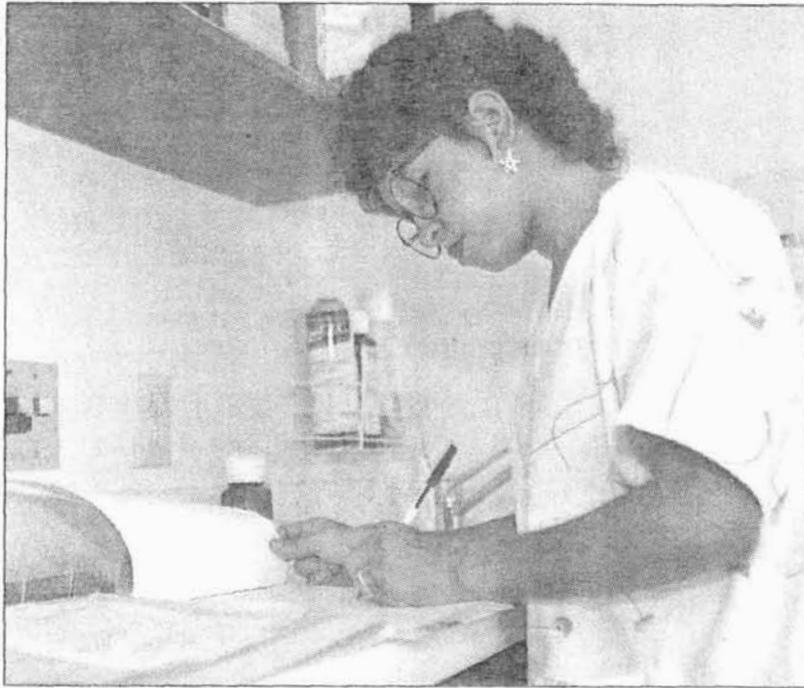
Literacy Coordinator Linda Light said the Department of Education is cutting the grant because of demographic changes on education and income.

"The numbers are it's hard to show a need," said, "but about half students have high scores, so the demographic is misleading."

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Sharon Valdez fills out a patient's chart at the dentist office in Newport Beach where she is employed. She credits the literacy program for helping her attain a position as a dental assistant.

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Literacy Coordinator Linda Light said the Department of Education is cutting the grant because of demographics, based on education and income.

"The numbers are high, and it's hard to show a need," she said, "but about half the literacy students have high school diplomas, so the demographics appear meaningless."

The expiring federal grant pays for three half-time employees, including Light, whose main job is to train volunteers to teach reading and spelling in sessions of at least two hours a week.

About 185 students are learning to read and write, and there are 230 volunteers, most of them tutors.



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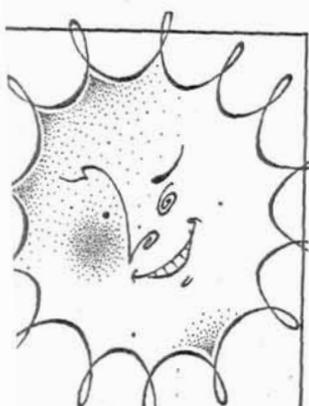
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