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### Project #72: Empathic Inquiry: An Approach to Assessing Social Needs among Patients

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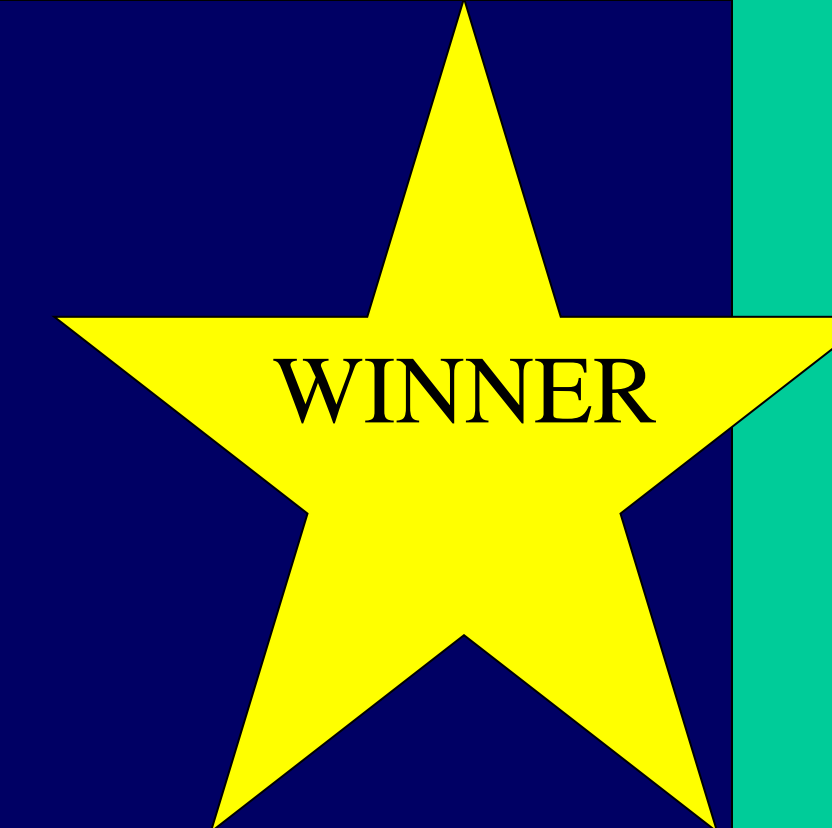
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## AIM

- Improve screening rates and results for social determinant of health (SDOH) needs, specifically food insecurity (FI), among patients across all HFH primary care clinics
- Design and implement a training with the goal of improving screening rates by giving staff the communication skills required to appropriately assess patients' needs
  - Provide staff with tools to enhance the patient care experience by using empathy when assessing patients' social needs
  - Equip staff with information to comfortably answer patients' questions about why the health system is asking about their social needs
  - Give staff a better understanding of the process following a positive screen for food insecurity

## PLAN: INITIAL STATE

- **April 2021:** HFH initiated screening patients for food insecurity every 300 days into the standard clinical workflow for Medical Assistants (MAs) across all primary care clinics
- **June 2021:** Initial analysis of social needs screening data showed that MAs were not consistently screening patients for food insecurity
- **August-September 2021:** The team developed and conducted a short survey to ask MAs about their screening experience. Results indicated:
  - MAs did not understand the screening process
  - MAs felt uncomfortable asking patients sensitive questions
  - MAs felt patients were uncomfortable answering honestly about needs

## DO: INTERVENTIONS

- The team developed and implemented an Empathic Inquiry (EI) training curriculum for MAs, inclusive of:
  - Adapted existing EI curricula content to 30-minutes for MAs
  - Piloted the curriculum for feedback and revisions
  - Trained 6 facilitators who would lead training implementation
  - Created a pre- and post-training survey to obtain feedback and assess participant knowledge
  - Worked with Nurse Leaders to schedule training sessions
- From **January-May 2022**, 43 trainings were held with 380+ staff across primary care

## CHECK: EVALUATION OF CHANGES

- 203 pre-surveys and 109 post-surveys were analyzed:
  - The majority found the training to be helpful (Figure 1)
  - 98.4% knew the definition of empathy at baseline
  - At baseline 76.6% correctly defined implicit bias rising to 89.1% in the post-survey
  - Participants described a variety of new learnings (Table 1)
- FI screening rates were analyzed:
  - At baseline in December 2021, 19% of patients who were eligible to be screened were not; this dropped to 13% by the end of the EI trainings in May 2022 (Figure 2)

## MEASURES

Figure 1. Post-Survey Feedback on the EI Training  
How helpful did you find elements of the EI training?

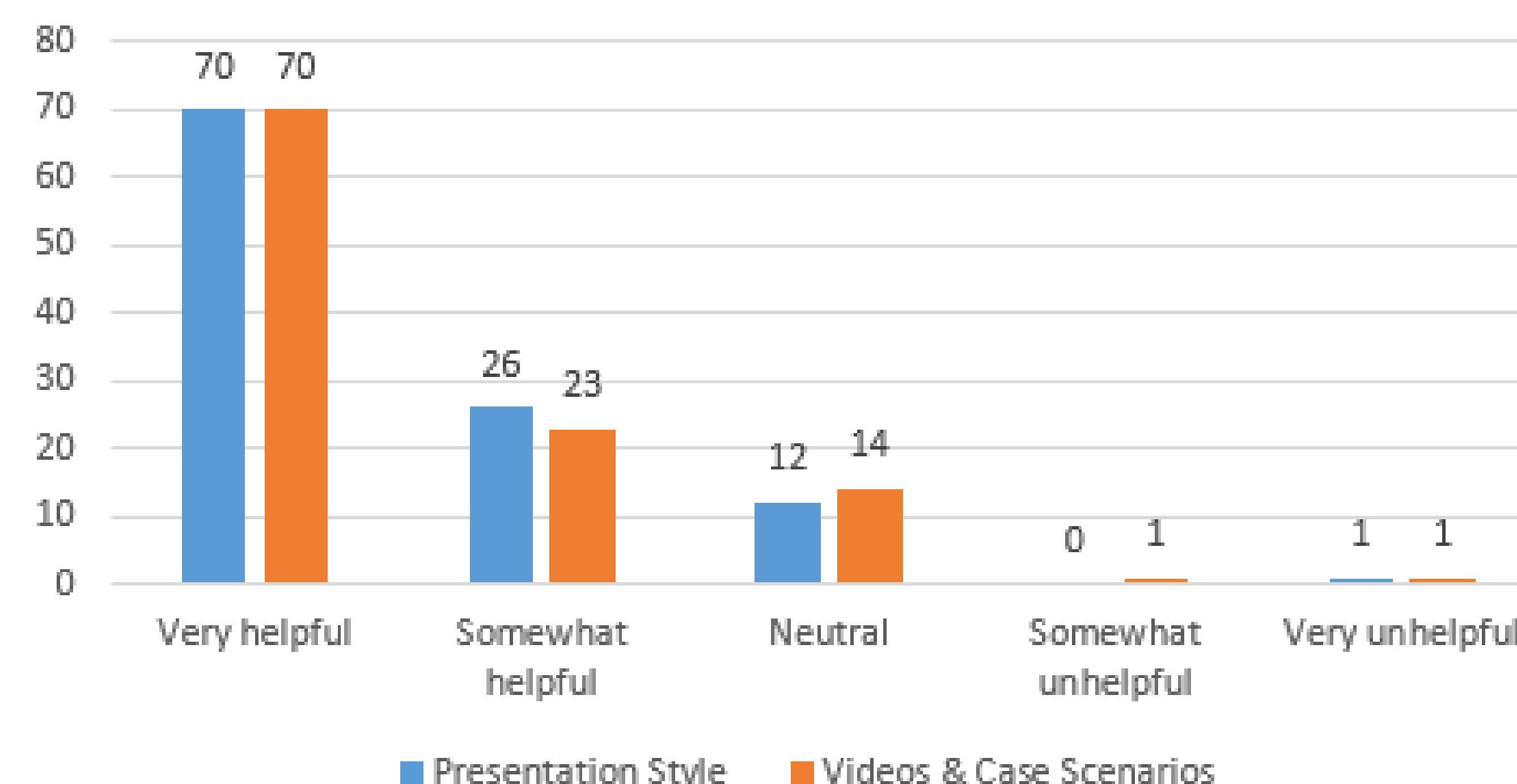
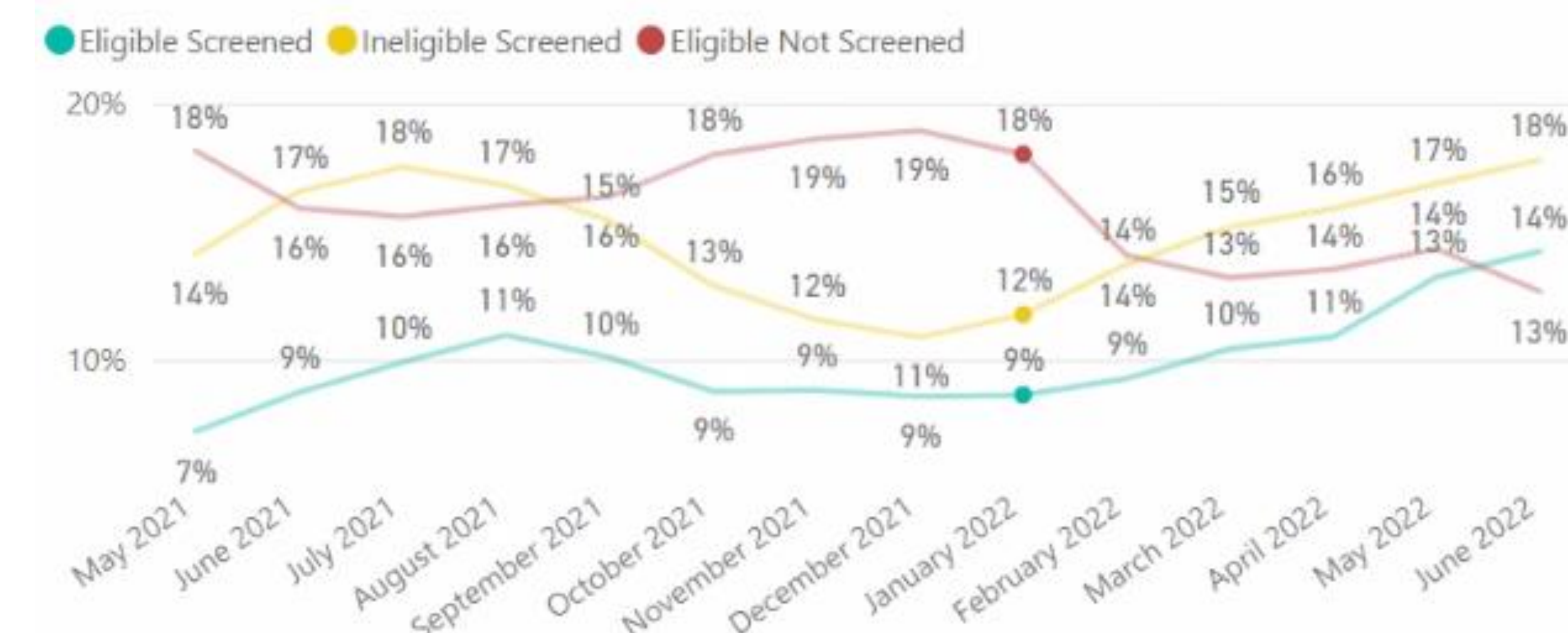


Table 1. Key Themes and Participant Responses to Describe Something New Learned from the Training.

Key Themes	Participant Responses
Increased knowledge on the process of Social Determinant of Health screening at Henry Ford Health	"Why we are asking the food need question."
	"Now I finally know what happens after the patient answers yes to both questions and that there is an outreach system in place."
	"Step process for what happens if social need is found, who and when patient is contacted. This I found to be helpful so I could tell the patient what to expect."
	"How to better phrase the question for asking if they need help with food."
Increased knowledge of the definition of empathy (N=6) and understanding the difference between empathy and sympathy (N=9)	"Ways to ask politely if a patient needs any food assistance. Listen carefully and let them know there will be a solution and I will help in any way possible. I will let them know the resources and programs we provide and get them that help."
	"The meaning of empathy."
	"Technical definition of empathy."
How to show and practice empathy	"Better understanding of what Empathy is and how to apply the tools presented."
	"The difference between empathy and sympathy because for so long I thought they meant the same thing."
	"Expressing empathy is powerful, it can build patient trust."
	"Apply empathy [in] daily situations."
Importance of listening skills	"To put myself in the patients' shoes."
	"Treat patients as I would like to be treated, with the utmost respect, and show them compassion."
Knowledge of implicit bias	"To really stop and listen fully to the patient [and] not rush through the questions."
	"How important it is to listen and understand patient needs."
Nothing or Not Applicable (N=25)	"Be careful of our biases when caring for a diverse group of people."
Other learnings	"No. Enhanced what was already there."
	"Social needs affect physical and mental health."
	"Some people are ashamed/proud to talk about themselves."

Figure 2. FI Screening Rates May 2021 – June 2022



## ACT: SUSTAIN & SPREAD

- The HFH SDOH Council is taking lessons learned from this quality improvement experience to improve the EI training
- New regulations require hospitals to screen and intervene on social needs of patients in 5 domains (food, housing, transportation, utilities, and safety)
  - This training will be updated and repeated across primary care in 2024
- Screenings of patients eligible to be screened improved throughout the duration of the training; however, future work needs to optimize the frequency of training for continuous improvement
  - The HFH SDOH Council is exploring the best ways to ensure this training content is delivered in an ongoing and sustainable way
  - I.e., during MA onboarding for new hires and via Henry Ford University for continuing education

## KEYS TO SUCCESS/LESSONS LEARNED

- Empathy is a critical skill for healthcare providers screening patients for social needs
- EI training helped many participants better understand and feel more comfortable with the FI screening process
- Participants who personally experienced FI or other social needs (n=32) tended to respond they were more comfortable asking patients about social needs, likely due to drawing on their own personal experiences to relate to patients more empathically
- Leadership support – especially engagement of Nurse Managers – is critical to ensure time is dedicated for MAs to participate in EI training and to support ongoing monitoring of correct SDOH screening rates in clinics
- There is potential for significant impact by scaling and spreading EI training across clinical delivery