

DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE IN A RURAL SETTING

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Introduction

During the last ten years the concept of information and referral services has become accepted as a legitimate function to be developed and carried out by public libraries interested in improving and expanding services to their communities. The majority of these information and referral centers have been established in urban areas as a response to the tremendous growth in social service programs in order to provide access to an overwhelming array of public and private services designed to serve the employment, housing, health, education, and recreation needs of urban residents. Many of those in need could benefit from the expanded services if they only know of their existence, knew eligibility rules, knew where and when to go to obtain help, knew how to cope with the bureaucracy and knew how to fill out the forms. Neighborhood information centers aimed their services at particular community groups in need of specialized assistance and gradually enlarge their scope to include all citizens.

In keeping with usual trends of development in rural areas, information and referral services are not widely provided in spite of the obvious need for them. Access to human services may be even more difficult in rural areas where low population density and distance between communities tend to isolate people. While many types of service organizations may exist, they are usually

scattered over a wide area involving several counties with little commitment to outreach, transportation, or follow-up. Directories and other publications serve a localized area, further limiting access to information.

The purpose of this paper will be to investigate the nature and objectives of community information service and relate these ideas to the development of a public library information center in a specific rural setting, i.e., Brookville, Pennsylvania. As more services become available to residents of small communities in outlying regions and the population shift continues in the direction of rural areas, small public libraries may be motivated by their desire to provide relevant service, to include an information and referral program as part of their concept of community service.

Background and Definitions

The need for effective information and referral programs is a fairly recent event in terms of history. This need has been created during the last few decades by the proliferation of social services available to the average citizen in areas such as housing, health, family planning, recreation, legal aid, drug information, and welfare. These services have remained largely inaccessible to a great number of people who need them because of the difficulty in overcoming barriers of poverty, ignorance, and prejudice. Information and referral services have been established to alleviate the confusion and frustration in the delivery of increasingly complex human services.

Initially, information and referral services were carried out under the auspices of private and public social agencies, but these were usually narrowly focused and rarely neutral. The first public attempts to provide comprehensive information and referral were the creation of the British Citizens Advisory Bureaus and the similar American Community Advisory Centers after World War II.¹ During the 1960s, the Public Health Service, the Administra-

tion on Aging, the Office of Economic Opportunity, the Community Services Administration, the General Accounting Office, and Housing and Urban Development all engaged in activities identified as information and referral but which concerned themselves primarily with disabled, chronically ill, or aged clientele and the facilities serving these people.² In the private sector, the United Way, the Easter Seal Society, the Urban Coalition, and various special interest groups and social agencies have established information centers on a local basis. Information and referral activities have become more complex along with the increasingly complex field of social services, involving the use of classification systems, computer technology, and the appearance of "I & R specialists." The growth of this new professional community is reflected in a national professional association, the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS), various state organizations, annual national conferences, and a developing body of literature including a specialized "I&R" journal.

Finally, public libraries have become active participants and developers of information and referral programs. Motivated at first by their need to engage in pursuits more relevant to the needs of inner city residents, library community information services have expanded to meet the needs of all citizens requiring access to information affecting their daily lives. The interest in information and referral service shown by librarians has resulted in the formation of the Community Information Section of the Public Library Association (division of ALA). This section has hosted workshops to discuss information and referral service within public libraries and the need to develop national standards or guidelines. I&R services in libraries are typically an addition to an already existing reference function and involve providing information about social services along with the more traditional reference questions. A

survey of six hundred public libraries by Thomas Childers showed that 68 percent claimed to be engaged in I&R services. However, Childers pointed out the difficulty of measuring the "bandwagon effect" because public libraries tend to confuse traditional library services with information and referral services, and it is currently popular to list I&R as one of the services offered by libraries.³

This confusion and accompanying controversy over the meaning and nature of information and referral has resulted in the adoption of a consistent definition and national standards by AIRS. Thus information and referral describes the active process of linking a person with a need or problem with a service which will meet the need or solve the problem.⁴ The importance of the terms "linking" and "process" must be emphasized in relation to this definition, since information and referral consists of creating a liaison or "link" between problem and solution, need and resource, by means of effectively communicating information to help patrons solve their problems and get the services they need. Information is the link by which a "process" is carried out enabling successful communication involving specific individuals in specific problem situations.

Community information centers vary in the kinds of functions performed, ranging from limitation to information only, to provision of referrals to other agencies, and finally to active involvement as an advocate. In establishing an information center it is essential to predetermine the role which the center will play since this role will affect the type and amount of information collected, the population served, and the type of staff chosen to perform the duties. The full range of possible activities which may be undertaken by an information and referral center have been listed by Frank Kopecky in his analysis⁵:

1. Information. In the narrow sense, information involves answering questions about service, facilities, programs, and law which are not specific to any particular individual.

2. Advice. Advice differs from information in that an individual interpretation is called for, usually an assessment of the situation.

3. Steering. Steering consists of directing a person to another place where the information, advice or service can be found.

4. Referral. Unlike steering this generally involves contacting the agency or group which can give the needed assistance. An appointment is made, and sometimes the person is transported or escorted.

5. Personal assistance. This function could involve aid with filling out or making an inquiry by mail or telephone.

6. Casefinding. Also known as counseling, this function involves a determination of the true nature of the problem through an in-depth interview to diagnose the situation, to identify at the operational level those inquiries which require specialized services, and to develop referral strategies to meet the person's needs. This differs from social casework in that the diagnostic process is preliminary and aimed at finding an agency which can meet the need as presented. It is the role of this agency then to develop the appropriate treatment.⁶

7. Follow-up. Also called case accountability, this function requires that the information center re-establish contact with the inquirer to determine whether the information provided was satisfactory or whether the referral agency was able to help. This is important in view of the number of uncontrolled variables which may have affected the communication as a result of interpretation or translation.

8. Outreach. This is an effort to attract patrons to the information center. Advertising and attending meetings are examples of outreach.

9. Feedback. As a result of analyzing the type of problems brought to the attention of the information center, a pattern of community need may be detected. Statistics can be kept and made public to help planners.

10. Advocacy. This involves not only the giving of advice and information but taking of further steps to see that results are achieved.

There has been a great deal of controversy over the issue of advocacy as it applies to a function of a community information center. Advocacy by library information centers is recommended by Croneberger and Luck as a type of interpretation/intervention.⁷ In this context advocacy is not a political activity, as viewed by those who disapprove of this type of role for information centers, but is a much needed and appropriate aspect of information and referral. As the purpose of the information center is to help patrons get information and services which they are unable to get on their own, it may sometimes be necessary for the center to intervene more directly between the patron and the agency in order to accomplish that purpose. When intervention is required the appropriate role of the center is that of an interpreter. Some patrons may need an interpreter to deal with agencies, possibly because of language difficulties or because they do not know how to communicate over the telephone. A patron may seek help from an information and referral center after failing to receive the service he wanted from an agency, and as a neutral third party the information center may be helpful in dealing with the agency to interpret the patron's situation and the agency's response. This involvement may be enough to give priority to the case in question and obtain the desired service.

In a related issue concerning the advocacy role of information centers, Kopecky⁸ also stresses political neutrality; however, the complexity and importance of local political issues must not be ignored by the library information center. If citizens are to function properly in the political process, they must have access to the information available for use in advocacy and political activities. As a source of current community information available to the general public, the library can provide an essential role in the advocacy process without becoming directly involved in confrontation. This role is to collect and make available the information with which an involved and informed citizenry can actively participate in the political process. Information can be kept, for example, on police, education, public housing, public health, zoning, and other areas of local public interest. Local newspaper clippings organized and filed by subject can be kept. Rules and regulations of various government programs can be maintained and copies of all planning reports concerning the community can be obtained and made available. In this way the library goes beyond the referral function by supplying the information which is needed for successful advocacy.

In seeking justification for public libraries establishing community information centers, Joseph Donohue has described the features which make the public library suited to the task:⁹ 1) its primary function is to provide information; 2) it exists to serve the entire community; 3) it has broad subject capability; 4) its staff specializes in collection, storage, and retrieval of information; 5) it is impartial, devoted to the general interest, rather than special interests; 6) it is a public, non-profit agency, but it is also a collaboration between the public and private sectors - thus it has some independence from political control. It is noted that referral service

is not a new concept to public libraries; librarians have always done referral work, although not necessarily with "daily living" problems, but they have maintained files of resource people to call upon when the library could not provide the answers. What is new for the library in establishing a community information center is the requirement for dealing with "elusive" sources.¹⁰ The library would be responsible for the identification and collection of non-published and informally published data in order to bring the information seeker and information source together. Although the library's book collection or other published sources would not be ignored when appropriate, the library would actively seek out the needs and specialized sources of information existing in the entire community.

Brookville Area Library Information Center

Brookville is a rural town (borough) in northwest central Pennsylvania with a population of 4,800. It is the county seat of a totally rural county having a population of under 50,000. All surrounding counties are also rural in nature and population; the nearest urban centers are approximately 100 miles in any direction (Pittsburgh, Erie, Altoona). The towns in this area are located twenty miles from one another with farmed and forested countryside and tiny communities inbetween. The major industries in the area are mining, lumbering, and farming with a small amount of manufacturing. Brookville's working population consists mainly of retail establishments, government (borough and county) employees, service occupations, professionals, and trades people. There is a large elderly population and an attempt on the part of government and social organizations to provide the services they need. Cultural events and educational opportunities beyond the one public high school

can be obtained only by driving at least twenty miles from Brookville. Public transportation consists of infrequent and limited bus service between the towns; everyone is totally dependent on the automobile for daily living.

This plan for a Library Information Center would meet the challenge of linking the residents of the rural Brookville area with needed services which are widely scattered throughout the several surrounding counties. The information files, staff, and telephone would be located at the Rebecca Arthurs Library in Brookville and would be available to patrons initially during the hours the library is open (40 hours per week). The hiring of an additional staff member would be necessary to administer the gathering of data, set up the files, and oversee the program. It should require approximately six months to implement the program.

Objectives of BALIC

1. To create an expanded information service within the public library which will assist individuals and organizations with finding information and information sources in answer to particular needs and will enable the general public to use effectively the available community services, facilities, and resources, both public and private.

2. To identify on a continuing basis the current informational needs of the entire community (to include the outlying areas around Brookville) and include those who are not now library users. The center should seek to identify sources of information both within and outside the library system which relate to problems of rural life.

3. In defining the role of the center, it would be concerned mainly with the identification, acquisition, conservation, and dissemination of information

through a process of communication between patrons and agencies. In order that the center be a reliable, unbiased source of information to all groups, it is vital that it be impartial. It is recognized that the roles of counselor, adviser, and advocate are important to the improvement of social conditions; in this context the function of the center is to enable those individuals and groups competent to fulfill these roles to operate more effectively by providing necessary information services.

4. As the basic tool of the information center services, to establish a Resource File of all identifiable sources of information, published and unpublished, to be made accessible to all citizens of the community. These resources may also include the names of persons with particular subject expertise who are locally available to answer questions. The Resource File may be used to compile a Directory of Community Services which would be circulated among the public.

Guidelines¹¹

I. Library administrative commitment and support

- A. The library administration must be committed to the concept of the information and referral program before it is initiated and this commitment should be reflected in the administration's priorities and goals.
- B. The administration should be involved in planning, staff training, and continuing support for the program.

II. Goals, objectives, and evaluation

- A. Goals and objectives for the program should be based on assessment of actual community needs and the intended impact on actual and potential users.

- B. Goals should be compatible with the other goals of the library and should be clearly understood and accepted by all who are involved in providing service.
- C. Measurement and evaluation are necessary to demonstrate the accomplishment of goals and objectives.
 - 1. Output or services rendered should be used to measure performance.
 - 2. Methods should be developed to check resource file accuracy and completeness.

III. Assessing the needs of the community for planning purposes.

- A. The library must investigate the nature and scope of any information services already being provided to the community.
- B. Possible cooperative relationships with other service agencies should be explored.
- C. The initial use of existing planning surveys and reports and direct communication with area residents and organizations can be useful in assessing the extent of services.

IV. Funding

- A. A detailed proposal should be drawn up outlining all cost factors involved in the development and provision of the services.
- B. Funding may be budgeted as a separate item or included in another program of the library's budget.
- C. Funds may be required from outside (federal or private) sources as well as local, requiring a careful analysis of the library's ability to sustain the service beyond the original funding.

V. Staff selection and training

A. Criteria for staff selection

1. Ability to relate to people of various ages, races, and cultural backgrounds.
2. Knowledge and versatility in the use of library and community resources.
3. Ability to be integrated into existing staffing patterns.

B. Training of staff

1. All library staff should have a clear understanding of the goals of the service.
2. Information service staff should receive training to further their understanding of human behavior, to augment their knowledge of resources and the operation of agencies, to improve their communication skills, to sharpen their ability to assess a patron's needs, and to learn to help a patron solve his problem.
3. Training must be received in procedures for data collection and file maintenance.

C. Methods of training

1. Individually or in groups
2. Lecture, discussion, reading, self-programmed course, AV materials, tours, role playing, on the job training.

VI. Data file

- A. An accurate, current file of organizations and services available to the community is the basis of the information and referral program.

1. Existing files or directories may be useful toward file development.
 2. The goals of the service will dictate the scope of information to be included.
- B. File format
1. Ease of entering, maintaining, and retrieving information is of utmost importance.
 2. Efficient file update and maintenance procedures should be developed from the beginning.
- C. Library staff should be involved in data collection process as much as possible for greater understanding of the service.
- D. Methods of collecting data.
1. Personal visits
 2. Telephone interviews
 3. Mailed questionnaires
- E. Access should be by title and subject. A controlled subject heading list should be developed.
- F. Files should be updated either through continuous revision or at intervals sufficiently frequent to sustain accuracy of information.

VII. Delivery of service

- A. Physical setting - important components are accessibility and visibility of the service, proximity of resource and backup files, sufficient telephone lines, and provision for private interviews in an adjacent area.
- B. Transaction with the patron

1. Effective listening and skillful interviewing to define problems or questions.
 2. Responding with the correct information or most appropriate options among viable referrals.
 3. Facilitating service provision by making contact with an agency to arrange for services.
 4. Following up by contacting the patron or agency for assurance that the patron has obtained the desired service.
 5. If advocacy is to be a component, undertaking rearticulation of the patron's problem to the agency if service was not provided or exploring alternative referrals.
 6. Confidentiality throughout the process must be maintained and information provided in a neutral, unbiased manner.
- C. Keep a daily log of questions and actions taken for analysis and evaluation of this service.

VIII.Publicity

- A. A vigorous publicity campaign is recommended for effective public utilization of the service.
- B. Possible forms: public service announcements in the mass media, personal contact, speaking engagements, feature articles, news stories, interviews, telephone directories, displays, classified ads, booths at fairs, mail inserts, newsletters, and printed materials such as brochures, posters, and handouts.

BALIC Resource File

The Resource File is the basis for the Library Information Center and consists a file of 5" X 8" cards arranged alphabetically by name and served by an index file arranged by subject or service. Access to the Resource File is facilitated by the use of abundant cross references to similar subject headings and new entries. The data for each entry in the Resource File includes the complete agency or association name, address, telephone number, purpose, director's name, name of contact persons, hours opened, eligibility requirements, meeting times, application procedures, fees, geographic area served, branch offices. This is followed by a description of services provided by the agency. Cards can easily be changed and updated as needed and this should be carried out on a continual basis.

Reference sources should cover organizations and persons with specialized services or skills; government sponsored agencies and services; difficult situations and where to go for help, and miscellaneous information regarding all municipal government officials and committees, school officials and committees, nursery schools, churches, and meeting rooms. It would be also be a good idea to keep a file on local and regional upcoming events of a cultural, educational, or recreational nature and a compilation of tourist attractions and what to do in the area (golf courses, picnic areas, tennis courts, etc.). Difficult situations include family problems, consumer complaints, financial difficulties, medical problems, legal aid, accommodation problems and victims of disasters. It is especially important in these situations to know the agencies which can offer assistance.

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Providing community information services through the public library involves essentially the same principles in a rural setting as carried out in metropolitan areas: accurate information; trustworthiness; coordination and cooperation between individuals and agencies; and accessibility. The nature of the service may be more personal in a rural setting, but a great challenge would be public awareness - educating the public about the program. A few rural community information centers have provided services to greater portions of geographically remote residents by means of a traveling van which visits different sites each day or week following a publicized schedule.¹² Representatives from various agencies may be on hand occasionally to discuss issues of concern with local citizens and the van can also bring forms for a variety of purposes (income tax, consumer complaint, food stamp applications, voter registration, rebates, etc.) which may be more convenient for those living in remote areas.

The American Library Association and the Report from the White House Conference on Libraries and Information services have called for libraries to provide unrestricted access to all library resources and information services for all citizens in all circumstances. Libraries, including rural public libraries, must be aware of their changing roles and responsibilities. Developing a Library Community Information Center is an excellent means for a concerned public library to provide responsive service to all members of its community.

Footnotes

¹Carol A. Becker, Community Information Service: A Directory of Public Library Involvement (University of Maryland, 1974), p. 47.

²Carol L. Kronus and Linda Crowe, eds., Libraries and Neighborhood Information Centers (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1972), pp. 3-4.

³Thomas Childers, "Survey of Public Library Information and Referral Service," typescript (Philadelphia: Drexel Univ., 1977).

⁴Robert Croneberger, Jr. and Carolyn Luck, "Defining Information and Referral Service," Library Journal 100 (November 1, 1975): 1985.

⁵Kronus and Crowe, Libraries and Neighborhood Information Centers, pp. 63-64.

⁶Croneberger and Luck, "Defining I&R Service," p. 1986.

⁷Ibid., pp. 1986-7.

⁸Kronus and Crowe, Libraries and Neighborhood Information Centers, pp. 70-71.

⁹Joseph C. Donohue and Carole Peppi. The Public Information Center Project (Baltimore: Enoch Pratt Free Library, 1971), p. 40.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 41.

¹¹Based on "Draft Guidelines for Establishing I&R Services in Public Libraries," Public Libraries 18 (Fall 1979): 63-64.

¹²Virginia C. Detrick, "What Can I&R Do For a Rural Area?" Unabashed Librarian 24 (1977): 3.

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