CLARION COUNTY INFORMATION AND REFERRAL:
A RURAL INFORMATION CENTER

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"Good moring, Clarion County Information and Referral Office. May I help you?"

Since August 18, 1980, residents of Clarion County, Pennsylvania, can call either a local or a toll-free number from 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM for assistance in accessing the social service system in the county, for information concerning governmental matters, or for help with a variety of other problem areas. This small I&R center uses a manual retrieval system with a financial and personnel capability that could be duplicated in county library systems.

Structure

The Clarion County Information and Referral Office was established within the Clarion County Department of Community Development and is funded by county government and four county human service agencies: Clarion County Area Agency on Aging, Clarion County Mental Health/Mental Retardation Administration, Clarion County Children and Youth Services, and Clarion County Drug and Alcohol Abuse Office. It was established to provide a central access point to the human service agencies and to county government.

Staffing

The office is staffed with one full-time professional information specialist and a secretary who works for both the I&R Specialist and the Clarion County Transporation Coordinator. The I&R Specialist was hired six weeks prior to the opening of the I&R Center. These six weeks were spent in gathering information, organizing the research files, establishing procedures, and designing information-gathering, statistical-reporting, and follow-up forms. The present specialist has a masters degree in library science; other I&R centers may find different expertise and training appropriate for the position.

Building the Resource File

The basis for the resource file of Clarion County's I&R Office is carefully organized information about the various human service agencies that serve county residents. Agency throughout this paper is used as a term to encompass any organization--public, private nonprofit, private for profit, or volunteer--that is a human service provider, e.g., Clarion County Housing Authority, Clarion Osteopathic Hospital, nursing homes, Salvation Army, etc.

A single agency intake form was designed to be used in collecting necessary information from the agencies and organizations that provide human services to county residents. It was important to design a form which would provide all the necessary information about a service agency that the I&R Office would need to make an appropriate referral. This information went beyond a listing of agency name, location, phone number, hours of service, and director's name; a major component was the identification of all services offered by the agency. To standardize this information, a list of terminology

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for social services designed by the Human Services Information System Project of Lancaster County, 1973[1], was used. Another major component was the inclusion of the factors that determined eligibility of service, e.g., income, age, residency, etc. A third important section of the form dealt with requirements of accessing the service, e.g., what documents must be presented to acquire services, how to make contact, handicap provisions, fees charged, etc.

After the form was printed in sets of three carbon-backed pages, the I&R Specialist began to interview the agency directors. A basic list of agencies and their services was available in computer printout form. This list had been gathered several years previously so it was out of date, but it was a beginning. The interviews were conducted either personally or by telephone. In retrospect, the time spent to do a personal interview at each agency site is worthwhile both for the clarity of information and the personal contacts with agency personnel. I would advise this personal approach as much as possible in establishing an I&R Office. The information on each agency was then typed, and a copy was sent to each director for verification.

After verification was completed, each agency form was filed in alphabetical order by agency name in a spiral binder; this format provides ready access by agency for the I&R Specialist.

The second component of the resource file was organized by a subject-problem approach. We used a visible desk file for this. A basic thesaurus of subject headings is Detroit Public Library's TIP Subject Heading List.[2] Under each subject heading we listed the agencies, their phone numbers, and other basic information needed by the I&R Specialist.

This is a simple format for a basic resource file of local agencies and, when done carefully, manual accessing can be effective. This basic

resource file is routinely updated yearly with approximately 1/4 of the listed agencies checked for accuracy of information every three months; however, any time the staff learns of a change in information the change is immediately noted on the agency form and in the visible file.

To supplement this basic file, specialized service directories are purchased whenever available. We have found that these directories are necessary to give residents of rural areas access to state and national service programs. Directories of 800 numbers are very useful, and I&R staff should note additional 800 numbers whenever available.

Telephone directories of surrounding communities and nearby large cities were also acquired. These were especially important in our rural county which is served by several different telephone companies and which also utilizes the services of agencies and organizations headquartered in neighboring counties.

Additional community information which was compiled includes civic organizations with a listing of officers and telephone numbers, local government officials, ambulance services, fire departments, and clergy. Pamphlet materials supplied by human service agencies were filed in vertical files according to subject area. Very often specific requests for information lead to new sources of services outside the county. We always ask these agencies to supply publications explaining their services so that information resource files continue to expand.

It has proved useful to have the telephone numbers and the contact persons for other I&R's in the state. This informal linking pays off in extra service for clients.

Interviewing and Follow-up

A substantial number of questions to our office are requests for information; however there are many clients who have serious problems, sometimes multiple in nature, which require more than giving information. In our office these people are designated as "Human Service Referrals or Clients."

With human service clients the I&R Specialist collects basic intake information. This interview usually will be done in the office, and the purpose is to work with the clients to develop a referral plan so that all agencies which provide the needed services are accessed in a systematic manner. A primary agency is designated to do case management for the client. The intent is to eliminate service gaps and to avoid frustration for the client. The client should not have to repeat the same basic information for each agency. A standard intake form in sets of five carbon-backed pages is used. With a client's permission a copy of the intake information is sent to each agency involved in providing service. Confidentiality of information is a basic right. No information is made available from the I&R Office without the client's permission.

Follow-up of the referral is important to evaluate the referral and to determine if the client is receiving help. With each human service referral the primary agency is sent an "Agency Satisfaction Form" to return to I&R indicating the appropriateness of the referral and its service plan for the client. The client is provided with a "Client Satisfaction Form" that allows the client to evaluate both I&R service and agency service. An assigned code number, not the client's name, appears on the follow-up forms to preserve anonymity. When evaluation forms are not returned, the I&R Specialist makes follow-up telephone calls to determine the success of the referral.

Logging Basic I&R Calls

Basic information and referral calls are logged on a form which provides for the source of the call, telephone number and address, date, time, problem, and remedy or referral. This is an easy form to use, and it allows for an evaluation of the types of requests coming in and the types of referrals that were made.

Letting the Community Know

One of the problem areas in rural I&R service is alerting the public to the service. In Clarion County there is no single newspaper that covers the entire county; there are five different papers which are subscribed to by residents in different parts of the county. There is one local radio station that covers a portion of the county; other area residents may listen to radio stations located in two other counties depending on where they reside. There is no local television station; television programing comes from cities 80 miles or more distant. Those contemplating the establishment of rural I&R's will encounter similar problems in designing publicity programs. We decided to utilize the commercial media we have available, but we also recognized that a strong effort in other modes of publicity must be made. We contacted clergy and supplied them with inserts for their church bulletins. Clergy were usually very cooperative because they encounter people daily who need assistance in finding social/human services. Posters were printed and distributed throughout the county. Volunteers took posters to laundromats, bowling alleys, medical centers, libraries, bars, post offices, and other places where people would be likely to see them.

Telephone stickers were printed and distributed throughout senior citizen centers, retirement housing, low income housing offices, Head Start Centers, and day care centers. Brochures and letters explaining our services were sent to school guidance counselors, school librarians, doctors' offices, medical clinics, ambulance services, local government officials, funeral directors, and human service agencies and organizations. Brochures were also distributed through Welcome Wagon to new residents moving into the county. Letters were sent to presidents of civic organizations asking them to inform their members and offering programs on the I&R service.

This effort to let the community know must be maintained; it can not be a one-shot publicity blitz. Many of the people who need information the most do not copy/retain the telephone number. In rural areas isolation is a big problem; the I&R staff must use ingenuity in breaking through this service barrier; good public relations is a continuing process.

Who Calls and Why

During the early months of operation, requests have covered a broad spectrum of needs. The I&R Office has had calls from people seeking very basic information, such as where to register to vote, where to buy a dog license, how to obtain a permit to sell fire arms, where to apply for low income energy assistance, how to apply for a copyright, how to get a passport, etc.

We have also had requests that require sophisticated interviewing skills. The client either isn't aware of his specific problem or is reluctant to face it. These requests are usually stated in an oblique fashion so that staff must use interviewing techniques that don't irritate or frighten the

client, yet do clarify the request. Recently a county resident called to ask for help with her aging mother. The question then became what kind of help? Actually she needed advice and support to place her mother in a nursing home. She also needed information about what homes were available, their costs and their services. A referral to an Area Agency on Aging outreach worker was made.

Sometimes callers are extremely distressed. We have had wives seeking abuse centers; we have had people threatening suicide; we have had anonymous reports of child abuse. In the first week of operation, I received a call from a gentleman seeking marriage counseling; while I was explaining the different services available, his wife came on the extension and threatened to sue me for breaking up her marriage. For the next few minutes my patience and sense of humor were tested but the referral was made, and the couple did enter counseling.

Many of our requests deal with needs for financial assistance. These are referred to the appropriate service agencies. For some of these requests, there is no help available because of ineligibility or exhaustion of benefits. Such requests can sometimes be helped at least temporarily by private agencies. Perhaps the hardest part of I&R is dealing with situations of real distress when there is no help. The "safety net" of social services has rents and tears.

It is interesting to me as a librarian that many requests for information are typical reference questions that could have been directed to the public library. It leads me to wonder why my office received the call. Was it because many people do not think of public libraries in rural areas as information centers?

I&R -- Who Does it Benefit?

Primarily, Information and Referral Offices benefit the clients who make requests by saving them time and frustration in satisfying their needs. I&R Offices also benefit the service agencies in a three-fold manner: (a) Clients are not sent to a service agency unless their problem matches the programs provided by the agency; (b) Without I&R, people in trouble often call service agencies at random; this is time consuming, and service agency personnel are obligated to make referrals to other more appropriate agencies; (c) Service agency personnel often ask I&R for information concerning other human service agency programs.

Information and Referral Offices can also serve the community at large by identifying social service gaps. Feedback indicates the ability of the community to meet the needs of its people. This information becomes very important in times of tight tax dollars when local government officials must establish priorities.

Conclusion

We are a nation that is both information rich and information poor. In any community a wealth of information exists, often scattered among many agencies and organizations, sometimes only in the minds and memories of individuals in various agencies and organizations. This fragmented information is usually difficult for the average resident to access. The information-seeking resident can reach high levels of frustration and still remain information poor. A central access point for information-seeking clients, staffed by trained personnel whose major responsibility is to satisfy these information needs, can enrich the quality of life for all rural residents.

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FOOTNOTES

1. Standard Service Definitions in Human Services. Human Services Infor-
   mation System (HSIS) Project of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, 1973.

2. TIP Subject Headings. Detroit: Detroit Public Library, 1979.