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Community information – bringing it all together
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Abstract:

Community Information Strategies Australia Inc. (CISA) is the peak community information organisation in South Australia. For 22 years we have provided a high quality comprehensive database of community services information for the benefit of the South Australian community. We have also supported a network of local community information providers in both metropolitan and country areas.

Over this time our product has evolved from a printed directory to a subscription database and now a fully searchable web-based service. We continue to provide it in these 3 formats to meet a range of community needs. The web has made it possible to bring together the diverse sets of local community information and integrate them with the core dataset provided by CISA – resulting in a rich single point of access for community information.

However nothing is straightforward and combining information from different sources has highlighted a range of different approaches. To overcome this we have developed a standards-based approach to achieve greater consistency and quality across contributing datasets. CISA has published a *Standard for community information resource management*, a document that clearly articulates an accepted foundation for community information management.

We have built a system for easy uploading of datasets to the web, giving dataset owners the ability to edit offline and upload to the web as often as they wish. They also retain the ability to export and publish their information in print formats.

The Standard approach

According to the Macquarie Dictionary the word 'standard' has many meanings. Two definitions that match the current context are:

1. Anything taken by general consent and a basis of comparison; and approved model
2. A level of quality which is regarded as normal, adequate or acceptable

Or as SAI Global (formerly Standards Australia), a publisher of over 122 000 Australian Standards, International Standards, foreign standards, and business publications states:

- ... standards are the common denominator in countless daily business transactions, and facilitate trade between individuals, corporations and nations.
- ... they also add value through enhanced organisational intelligence, operational efficiency, and deliver measurable competitive advantage in the market place.

In the world of information management, standards are essential. There are well-known examples in the world of library management of the adoption of common systems of operation where their widespread use has brought enormous benefit around the world:

- The Dewey Decimal Classification (DDC) system - the world's most widely used library classification system
- *Library of Congress Subject Headings*
- Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules **AACR2**

- Cooperative cataloging - libraries working together to create bibliographic and authority records that can also be used by others
- Dublin Core Metadata Initiative - developing interoperable online metadata standards

We live in a world where the ability to exchange, share and pool information is increasingly important. This brings benefits to organisations which then have no need to replicate each others' work unnecessarily. The communities they serve will also benefit as they will encounter familiar and consistent approaches to information management as they seek information to meet their needs.

Common approaches are particularly important in a world in which technology offers us many opportunities to capture, structure and publish information of different kinds in many different ways.

Community Information Strategies Australia Inc. (CISA) is the peak community information organisation in South Australia. We have set out to create a common approach for community information in our state through the development of a Community Information Standard. We believe that the standard has wider relevance and hope that it will ultimately be helpful in bringing together community information services and practitioners around Australia for the benefit of all.

What is community information?

Community information is information that assists people to identify and gain access to services and programs to meet their basic needs and to participate in their local or wider community.

Or to express it another way, it assists individuals and groups with daily problem-solving and with participation in the democratic process.

In general, community information describes government, non-government, community based and similar private sector organisations that provide services for the community in the areas of health, welfare, housing, education, community participation, information, legal services and recreation.

The management of community information is labour intensive work that requires continuous maintenance. This involves regular direct contact with every organisation represented in a particular dataset and close attention to every information component included.

Community information is an important commodity that represents enormous value to the community. Well constructed and maintained community information databases underpin the many information and referral services that assist individual and families who may be in crisis or who may have a simple problem for which assistance is readily available. Where would we be without a service such as Lifeline? Where would services such as Lifeline be without a comprehensive, credible information resource to support its counsellors?

Current comprehensive community information is an essential resource for the many professionals who provide helping services and who need to make effective referrals to a range of other services. Current comprehensive community information allows a local council to support their residents and businesses by providing a detailed information map of their community – describing who is doing what, where and for whom. Access to current comprehensive community information assists individuals to deal with problems they may be facing or to contribute to their community.

The lack of current comprehensive community information leaves people with few options other than informal networks and word-of-mouth – usually incomplete and unreliable – or piecing information together themselves from disparate and uncoordinated sources. We all know what it's like to browse the web, the telephone book or the Yellow Pages in the hope that the information we really need is going to appear.

Why is a common approach necessary?

The collection, management and publication of community information occurs at national, state, regional and local levels in Australia. However, as a nation we lack any overall coordination in this important area of information management practice.

A national body for community information providers, Community Information Networkers Australia Inc., was formed on the late 1990s but, lacking seeding or on-going operational funding, was unable to survive for long and lapsed.

A common national approach to community information is necessary to create a broadly accepted foundation for this activity that provides support to practitioners:

- to provide a quality information resource that meets the needs of their community
- to operate effectively and in a manner that is consistent with

- other practitioners
- to ensure that information services can readily exchange and share information, thus preventing duplication and inefficiency

This would involve the adoption of common tools such as

- a data structure, defining elements to be captured
- thesaurus of terms for subject indexing and retrieval
- style guide, defining editorial style
- technical specifications – to ensure online compatibility.

CISA has recently introduced this approach within South Australia.

How we began

CISA was established in 1981 as the result of a combination of factors. The State Government in SA was supportive of principles of community development, including the provision of information to the community. This attitude was reinforced by community advocacy from the South Australian Council of Social Service and Adelaide Citizens Advice Bureau which saw the need for a centralised support service that would provide training and consultancy to the community as well as compile and publish a Directory of Social Welfare Resources.

CISA has always had a statewide coordination and leadership role in South Australia. This has given us the ability to set the broad directions for community information practice and provide a framework that could be followed by the services operating at the local level.

In the pre-computer days when all information was paper-based this was not so easy. But computerisation enabled us to create the foundation of a standardised approach that could be distributed to and adopted by others. Initially this consisted of two basic tools that are still in use:

- Data structure – a standard field set
- Thesaurus – CISA's community services thesaurus of 2000+ terms

The first version of the Infosearch database was launched in 1990. It has undergone considerable change and development since then. However, from its inception it has embodied these basic information management tools.

The evolution of information sharing - offline to online

Infosearch provided a means for the distribution of South Australia's community services database in electronic form to external users. It allowed all local community information managers to receive the same core dataset of information about state and regional services and to augment it individually with local information datasets. The core data was updated and distributed quarterly.

This was a 'one to many' model with CISA at the centre of the hub, connected to many local services. These were not connected to each other due to the limitations of pre-internet technology. Software enhancements created the possibility for locally owned datasets to be shared on a voluntary basis but this relied on individual negotiations between owners and was not widely taken up.

Moving Infosearch on to the web in 2001 was a major development that enabled the statewide pooling of datasets to form a comprehensive seamless resource of information about

all community services and organisations in South Australia. The ability to pool datasets also offered the means to integrate the previously unconnected local services and to give them access to each other's information.

However, integrating datasets from diverse sources also raised issues of quality, consistency and standards.

Separating the concept from the product – the Community Information Standard

CISA developed the *Standard for community information resource management* in 2003 in response to the need to define and refine our expectations of multiple local contributors to Infosearch and to recognise the activity of community information management as distinct from a particular product.

The standard was developed in collaboration with PLAIN Central Services, the support body and purchasing group for public libraries in SA, and the Local Government Association which was developing a website platform for local councils. It was necessary to allow community information to be managed via the platform of a user's choice provided there was compliance with clearly articulated criteria.

The components comprising the standard include the following:

- Data structure – a standard field set
- Thesaurus – CISA's community services thesaurus of 2000+ terms
- Style guide – based on AGPS Style Guide to cover content and editorial aspects

Technical specifications – document type definition (DTD) describing an XML format that meets online compatibility requirements

The standard is intentionally brief and simple. It is maintained by a reference group that meets at least annually to review and recommend changes. It has been voluntarily adopted by many community information practitioners throughout the state.

The *Standard for community information resource management* is available from CISA's website – www.cisa.asn.au.

Another dimension to information standards

CISA has developed 2 publicly accessible websites for community events (Eventspool – www.eventspool.com) and community news (Common Knowledge News – www.commonknowledge.net.au). These sites enable anyone from the community to add their own event or news items using a standard template that ensures quality and consistency. We have recently completed an interface that links an organisation's community services information with their event information and news, providing a comprehensive overview of services, activities and achievements.

The future

We would like to encourage a national dialogue about a standardised approach to community information. We are currently involved in discussions with Lifeline National regarding information sharing.

We believe that the development of a national community information standard will enable adherence to common basic information management principles to the benefit of all who are involved in this activity. We believe that the steps we have taken within South Australia provide a useful model for wider implementation.

Keywords

Community information
Information management
Standards
Thesaurus
Data structure