

Letting the cat out of the bag: Developments in sharing community information in South Australia

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Abstract

Community networking offers a unique opportunity for the provision of community information. This paper considers how in partnership with CISA a variety of organisations facilitate access to appropriate and accurate information. Specifically the authors explore the use of CISA Infosearch as a medium for sharing information and the implications this has for community networking.

1. Introduction

The phrase ‘may you live in interesting times’ has never been more appropriate to the provision of community information, and Community Information Strategies Australia Inc. (CISA), than it is now.

In an electronic age where the Internet enables vast quantities of information to be made readily available at a click of a button (or possibly two), it can easily be assumed that community information is accessible to any that may want it.

This of course is not the case. Accessibility of information requires organisation and management, so that it is not only available but also easily retrievable. The challenge for information providers, including CISA, is how do we provide access to appropriate and accurate information in this environment?

In South Australia, community networks sharing information using a common software platform – CISA Infosearch – offer a solution that enables information providers to meet this challenge.

2. CISA

Community Information Strategies Australia Inc. (CISA) is the peak community information organisation in South Australia. We believe that people need continuous access to appropriate and accurate information in order to participate fully in society. CISA's mission is to promote an informed society by providing organisations with information management resources and services that are relevant, reliable and responsive.

CISA has been operating since 1981 as an information clearinghouse for community information. The idea is to have one central organisation dedicated to collecting and distributing statewide and regional information across South Australia, thus providing high quality, reliable information. With such a resource, other agencies are freed to concentrate on other aspects of their service delivery and avoid duplicating this effort.

So CISA is an 'information provider to the information providers'. We provide a core database of community services information for South Australia which is relied upon by a wide variety of organisations. Major clients include community and health organisations, crisis and counselling services, libraries, educational institutions, and local, state and commonwealth government.

3. CISA Infosearch

CISA's aim in developing CISA Infosearch has been to ensure that we make the best use of technology so that everyone may have access to the information they need.

Infosearch is designed to be a comprehensive system with all information and referral data needed by an organisation being stored in database structure. CISA provides its core data with quarterly updates to subscribing organisations. These organisations can then include specialist information to meet the needs of their users. For instance, Child and Youth Health use the CISA Infosearch database, with their own information added, to support their Parent Helpline which operates 24 hours, 7 days per week. Similarly, the Women's Information Service has over 700 women specific records, the Seniors Information Service include all their aged related data.

The general public can access the database in more than 130 public libraries across the state, ranging from Adelaide city and suburbs to distant communities like Coober Pedy and Ceduna. Rural communities in particular have appreciated having this information at their fingertips.

In August this year CISA released the new version of CISA Infosearch - CISA Infosearch:SA. The new software incorporates similar features to both Microsoft products and Web browsers in one easy-to-use interface. The software is designed to run on networks or stand-alone PCs using Windows '95 or above.

The design assists information providers to:

- search for information using a unique, sophisticated navigational system and advanced search tools
- share information between organisations by seamlessly merging multiple databases
- easily create and modify specialist information through the use of a sophisticated editor with no limit to document or field size
- easily publish information in print and HTML formats
- link to an agency's Web site or contact them through email

4. Sharing information in South Australia

4.1 Towards a new model

In the past, many information providers may have been reluctant to share information with other organisations. In many cases this has been due to a proprietorial view of the information collected, in other words a view that this information is ours and why should we share it with someone else.

However, this egocentric view of information is changing. In South Australia we are beginning to let the cat out of the bag and tell other organisations what information we are collecting.

For some years, CISA has been working with a number of community organisations to develop local community information networks. Many local government, community information providers are increasingly working with other local and regional organisations, rather than operating in isolation. This is due to a variety of factors:

- the need to reduce duplication of information and provide a holistic view of services in a region
- the widespread use of CISA information as core data
- CISA Infosearch as the community information platform of preference
- a greater awareness of the potential of CISA Infosearch, particularly the new version
- less resources
- potential of the Internet

4.2 Demonstration

It is possible to look for information in a variety of ways

- Index - CISA; ACF - Anti Cancer Foundation
- Subject - Community Legal Services; Cot Death for Sudden Infant Death; Women - Health
- Directory - Community Health Services - Metro

- Search- Child care; Child care and Salisbury; Dementia near secure

4.3 Examples of organisations sharing information

4.3.1 NAIL Project

The Northern Aged Information Liaison (NAIL) Project aims to facilitate the sharing of aged specific and local information across the Adelaide northern suburbs. Using CISA Infosearch as the platform 3 councils, Senior Information Service Inc. and Support-Link (an integrated aged care assessment service) have developed guidelines for the sharing of information. Other organisations involved include the Divisions of General Practice and other aged care service organisations

Issues such as the scope of the database, data collection standards, frequency of update are all being addressed.

4.3.2 City of Onkaparinga

The Onkaparinga Community Information Service Inc. is an independent community information service financially supported by both local and state governments. Not only does this service provide information direct to the public at its offices and by phone. Their community information database is available at

- all libraries and council area offices including the customer services unit and community services department through the local council network
- both the local federal and state MPs electoral offices
- the community health service

The model of a local community information service providing information to information providers is increasing. Many local community information services are moving to a new role. They are becoming in our terms 'mini-CISAs'. No longer are they the sole public face of information, instead they are now servicing the customer service units, health centres and other community service organisations. Many services have taken this as an opportunity (not a threat), as it enables them to provide wider access to community information.

4.3.3 Mount Gambier

In 1997 the South East Regional Health Service successfully gained a 'Networking the Nation' grant to provide a 1800 telephone health information service in the south east of South Australia. A strategic alliance was formed between the Health Service and the South East Community Information Centre (SECIS). SECIS collects and manages the information during the day and after hours it is staffed by Mount Gambier Hospital.

5. Challenges to sharing information

Although CISA Infosearch:SA can be used as the medium for the sharing of community information, there are still challenges that information providers seeking to form community networks and share their information must overcome:

1. Funding - this is an ongoing issue for all community services
2. Maintaining up to date and accurate information - this is an ongoing issue for community information services. For example in January 1998 CISA published its Directory of Community Services. Even though this information was accurate at the time of release we updated over 25% of the data in the following 6 months.
3. Maintaining people networks - by developing 'people networks' information providers not only have a way of maintaining accurate information they also have a mechanism of promoting the use of community information
4. Information literacy - this continues to be a major role for community information providers. Generally there is a lack of understanding of information management not only in the community, but also by policy makers and funding organisations. Information management is often seen as a simple clerical routine.
5. Database policy issues
 - Minimum standards - for example what is the minimum amount of information acceptable
 - Scope of the database - what is the coverage of each organisation, if the databases are to appear as seamless and also avoid duplication of effort
 - Consistency of style - if there are several editors to a database there needs to be agreement on the style of entry as well as language used
 - Updating schedule - all participants need to agree how often they will share updated information