

WORKING DRAFT

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**SHARING INFORMATION AND CREATING KNOWLEDGE?
ASSESSING THE VALUE OF ON-LINE RESOURCES TO
HOMELESS SHELTER WORKERS**

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Assessing the Value of On-line Resources to Homeless Shelter Workers**

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Slightly more than a tenth of the million-plus independent sector organizations are social service organizations. Some are large, but many are local, single-purpose organizations that were created by citizens in a community to respond to a local need or problem. Workers in these organizations have learning and capacity-building issues that are often met in larger or governmental organizations. This paper discusses the applicability of an online resource site to not only meet information needs of social service workers in one area, but also to use the practice wisdom of those workers to build the knowledge base.

Homelessness and especially family homelessness emerged as a national issue in the 1980s, a time of conservative political leadership and budget deficits. The initial responses to homelessness were local ones. When the Stewart B. McKinney Homelessness Assistance Act was passed in 1987, funding mechanisms were set up to infuse governmental funds into the existing non-profit organizations and support the creation of new ones. As a result, the provision of services to the homeless has been institutionalized as services carried out by non-profits, partially funded by categorical federal programs. In Wisconsin, for example, there are 113 homeless shelters. Over ninety percent of these are non-profit organizations, and more than half of these are local shelters.

This paper will report on the results of a pilot project to provide an on-line resource for direct service workers in homeless shelters, named HomeWords, which was launched in late December, 2000 (<http://facstaff.uww.edu/homewords>). The site is content-heavy, with over ninety pages. The four major sections of the site are Helping Clients Plan for the Future,

Integrating Service Provision with Advocacy, Parenting while Homeless, and Starting Points in Working with People who are Homeless. Because of the launch date, this is a preliminary report, with a much fuller report presented at the Independent Sector Research Forum on March 15-16, 2001.

A preliminary indication of the needs for resource materials and the nature of the potential participants in the resource site was revealed in the results of an online survey of homeless shelter workers. The survey was performed using iNetSurvey during the September 1-November 1, 2000. Shelters were solicited to go to the iNetSurvey site and take the survey by email sent to shelters with an email address. At the iNetSurvey site, respondents answered ten questions. The questions elicited information regarding the nature of the respondent's employer, role in the organization, staff duties, and staff education and experience.

An analysis of the first 85 respondents suggests a profile of the typical future user of a resource site for homeless shelter workers. The typical future user appears likely to work for an organization that serves homeless families and single individuals (54%) or homeless families and children (34%). For the most part (74%), these organizations employed more than three staff members that worked with families and children. The users were primarily administrators (71%), which is understandable given their role as electronic gate-keepers in most small organizations.

The training needs identified as the most useful and second most useful are shown below. The percentages indicate the percentage of the population that selected the particular option; the responses are rank ordered based upon the percentage response to both items.

The educational background of new hires provided an interesting trend. About 46% held a bachelor's degree in social work, counseling, or psychology and 26% held a masters degree in social work, counseling or psychology. This contrasts with the person who has been there the longest who most commonly holds a masters degree (42%). About 36% of the most recently hired persons have more than two and less than five years experience when working with homeless and/or low-income families while 77% of those who have been working the longest had more than five years experience in working with homeless and/or low income families.

	Most Useful	Second Most Useful
Helping clients/customers prepare for the future	33%	20%
Case management techniques	22%	12%
Helping adults with parenting/child management issues	9%	25%
Maintaining professional boundaries	6%	16%
Information on mental health issues	9%	11%
Techniques for effective advocacy	11%	6%
Dealing with conflict and anger	8%	8%

There are a number of barriers to constructing websites that are used and deemed to be of value to users. There are even more potential barriers in the construction of a site like HomeWords whose aim is to engage practicing workers in the ongoing evolution of the website. The site is an attempt to combine the experiences of the direct service workers who work with homeless families with the professional literature and research in an area, and formatting this in ways that are accessible and useful. The project director’s experience in a three-year project

training frontline workers from homeless shelters was that the workers were almost totally unaware of the professional literature, and the literature in many cases did not speak directly to the issues identified by the workers. Barriers that were identified in making the site useful were:

- 1) Initial Impression of Usefulness
- 2) Technical Limitations of Users
- 3) Ease of Use for those Visiting the Site
- 4) Need for Materials to be Accurate and Current
- 5) Difficulty in Reaching Potential Users
- 6) Encouraging Repeat Use of the Site
- 7) Enlisting a Core Group to Contribute to the Site

A description of the barrier and the strategies for overcoming each barrier follow.

Initial Impression of Usefulness

One of the major barriers to web site use is perceived utility by a new user. A research study by one of the authors (Dezendorf, 1998) examined the issue of non-use of computer-mediated communication. A resource site, funded by the federal government, was examined to determine non-use. The study examined the reasons why professionals presented with a resource site presumably designed and maintained to allow them to gain information and collaborate had a great number of new users but virtually no long-term users. One of the areas the research study focused on initial impression of usefulness by a new user.

The initial impression of usefulness appeared to have three major factors. First, the perceived utility varied based on the variety of information. This perception of variety was determined in part by the physical arrangement of the material, writing/graphic style, and content. The second factor was the relevance of the content to the new user. Relevance appeared to vary based on factual relevance as well as the manner in which the material was presented.

The perceived utility of the site is particular important to line workers (direct service, supervisors, or administrators of small shelters who often carry out daily work tasks) as opposed

to academics or staff persons in large organizations who are often the persons advising on or constructing resource sites. The factors discussed regarding initial impression of usefulness appear likely to encourage or discourage those line workers due to three reasons. First, line workers often search in shorter blocks of time than other users. Second, their interests in use of electronic resources are often more oriented to immediate applicability, i.e., practical application rather than theory or opportunities for organizational development. Third, these line workers are often more in need of communications with peers or persons in related situations due to their isolation in smaller organizations.

HomeWords was designed so that on the initial visit, there would be a variety of information that was easily viewed and downloaded. When launched in late 2000, the site had almost one hundred pages of content. It has been the Project Director's experience, based on a twenty-plus year span of providing training to social service workers, that people want information and techniques that they can use today, tomorrow, or Monday. The downloadable planning sheets and handouts are in a sense "instant gratification" for workers searching the site. It is also apparent that there is a variety of information— an initial reaction to the site is that the site visitors were able to readily find what was most central to their job

Technical Limitations of Users

Organizations in all sectors of the economy are using Internet-based communication and so are homeless shelters and programs serving the homeless. In Wisconsin, for example, all programs receiving housing funds from the state were required to obtain email addresses by 2000. Many of these organizations gained Internet access for Web browsing as they added email capability. However, the technology used in these organizations differs a great deal from their cousins in larger health and human service agencies such as state social service agencies.

Computers are often older, hand-me-downs with slow CPUs, small screens, and perhaps most critically using very slow connections to the Internet, many still using 28K modems. Therefore, download times were a critical issue in the site design.

In order to speed download time, graphics were very sparingly used, with only a single JPEG image on the first page and smaller ones on the left bar of interior pages. The page was designed to fit a 15-inch monitor and colors and fonts were limited. The resulting web site design was pilot tested by users in the field and final modifications made based on those comments.

Ease of Use for those Visiting the Site

The third factor identified in the study cited above (Dezendorf,1998) was ease of use. While there are many sources of information about construction of web sites offering multitudes of approaches, the components of this third factor appear common to many of those sources. These components include the directness of entry into the site, e.g., quick loading and avoidance of multiple screens before the material of most interest appears on the user's screen. Another important component is the lack of "bells and whistles" -- if the user is seeking instrumental support, demonstrating cutting edge technology is seen as reducing usefulness.

Creating a user-centered site was a prime factor in the design of the site. Navigation aids are available on all pages on a left bar and also at the bottom of each page. On several of the sections with a number of interior pages, the major pages in the section are shown at the top of the first page of that section.

Need for Materials to be Accurate and Current

The Internet promises information that is instantaneous, but without the filters in traditional publishing. Social work students and other professional users are warned to be skeptical about sources, about accuracy, and currency of information (Vernon and Lynch, 2000). To address these issues, the material in the site is carefully referenced, and the University affiliation is clear from the first page.

Difficulty in Reaching Potential Users

While more shelters are online than was the case only several years ago, it is difficult to reach potential direct service workers in shelters. There is no national organization that directly addresses service provision in shelters. Both the National Coalition for the Homeless and the National Alliance to End Homelessness are principally advocacy organizations, although both address service provision in some ways. There is no annual national conference for family shelters.

Multiple means were utilized to reach potential users, starting with compiling a mailing list for the INet Survey in the fall of 2000. The link to shelters on the National Coalition for the Homeless' website was reviewed for those with e-mail addresses. Multiple search engines were used to find shelters and service providers on the web with e-mail addresses. Participants in training sessions in the summer and fall of 2000 conducted by the Project Director were asked to leave e-mail addresses if they wanted to be notified of the site. From this, a mailing list of over 200 names was compiled (although 20% of these turned out to no longer be valid addresses).

Encouraging Repeat Use of the Site

There are “ghost towns” on the Internet, sites that no one visits. For HomeWords to be of long-term use, it needs to continue to evolve, to showcase what is being done and to respond to changing needs and situations. For that to happen, the list of contributors to the site needs to grow. This is the crucial barrier which is discussed below.

Enlisting a Core Group to Contribute to the Site

MIT Professor Judith Stefania Donath (1996) wrote,

"People on the net should be thought of not only as solitary information processors, but also as social beings. People are not only looking for information, they are also looking for affiliation, support and affirmation... If we view people as social actors, then we should view the net as a social technology. A social technology is one that makes it possible to find people with common interests, to talk with them and listen to them, and to sustain connections with them over time."

Enlisting a core group is central to the success of this site. The social technology of the listservs and the website, combined with the use of e-mail and telephone contact, may be sufficient to reach out to a group of workers who are anxious to both discuss and share what they have learned and found to be useful. At the time this paper is written, it is still too early to tell if this will be successful.

Response from Site Users

Response from users to the site has been anecdotal to this point. However, the first ten responses to a four question feedback survey give an indication that the site may be meeting needs, and that the site is easy to use. There were four topics or themes that were most common. Respondents liked the material that was immediately useful, with half the respondents citing the planning forms in Helping Clients Plan for the Future and the related websites. Three of the respondents' comments centered on the ability to be connected with others around the country.

One worker wrote

“I think it is a great idea to connect service providers from around the country to discuss issues/concerns and to create a relationship and a greater sense of the whole homelessness issue. This is one specific piece that would keep me coming back. To share with others in the homeless community makes great sense.”

As stated earlier, the INet Survey and the initial mailing to announce the website went primarily to administrators, who are usually the entry point for electronic communication to agencies. It is not surprising that three of the administrators responding cited the use of materials in the training of new staff. One former administrator who is now a planner stated:

“This would really be helpful to me if I were supervising students or new workers who had no prior experience (or little experience) working with homeless people. In fact, I plan to pass this on my colleagues who are supervising others.”

A fourth theme in the initial comments is that of the site as a reference point. Several direct service worker workers mentioned the material on underlying values and strength-based work with clients as helpful, in some cases as a review of what they had been exposed to but may not always remember. One worker stated:

I found the website to be fascinating and extremely helpful on an introductory level. The nuts and bolts of what we do identified, explained, and interpreted. The concepts of dignity and empowerment are especially helpful to those who may have lost sight of these concepts over a period of time - this site keeps it fresh and case by case rather than just another client attitude. . . This is a wonderful and extremely useful tool for those of us in this field. I will refer to it often as a reminder of what I am doing, why I am doing it and how I may be able to do it better, with more humanity and more effectively. Thanks for sharing this!”

Conclusions

The first conclusion from this project is that the existence of a resource site such as this one is feasible. The project used accepted design criteria, used a real-world base of organizations for testing, and gave the participants an opportunity to accept or reject the site. The initial results of the project indicated that shelter workers would find this site useful and that sufficient numbers of them would participate so as to allow the site to grow and remain attractive.

The second conclusion is that the creation of a resource site such as this one is feasible in terms of technical skills and equipment cost. The authors used outside technical help for the construction of the site. However, after the project was up and running, it was clear that construction of such a site as this one is within the technical skills the are conceivably located in a larger non-profit organizations and within five years will be within the capability of smaller non-profits. Much like the advent of word processing, once a highly esoteric skill requiring specialist machine operators, construction of these web sites will become a norm rather than an exception. The cost of equipment (hardware, software, and access to the Internet) is still high relative to the budgets of small non-profits, yet this too may change with falling hardware prices.

The major factor that will likely influence the continued existence of this site is the long-term funding for professional staff support for the site. Nurturing a group of active participants in a site is an ongoing process, as is responding to the needs of users for current material that addresses changing situations.

Recommendations

The project generated three recommendations. First, non-profits should be conscious of this new tool and seek out sites to explore and experiment. While the site in this research project (HomeWords) is available, there will be others that some persons may find more appropriate. Whatever the situation, the authors strongly suggest that non-profits add to staff work plans time for exploration of this new innovation.

Second, non-profits should examine the opportunities while at conferences or meetings for joint action to create resource sites that would serve their particular interests rather than waiting for third parties (such as academics, vendors, or governments) to develop these services. Once started and adopted, in the experience of the authors, resource sites are difficult to replace

for a variety of reasons. For example, once a vendor has created an attractive resource site but one that is biased toward a particular economic approach, the site users may lack the finances and the motivation to create an alternative resource site.

Third, innovate, innovate, innovate. The changes in social patterns, available technology, and the non-profit world are likely to reward those who constantly monitor the environment, evaluate new ideas, and operationalize some of those ideas in the form of innovations in their operations.

Implications for Non-profit Organizations

This is a pilot test of an innovation useful for shelter workers interested in staff and organizational development. The first implication for non-profit organizations is that this particular innovation appears to have the potential for becoming a permanent part of their staff and organizational development plans. As a result, non-profit organization administrators and staff may need to give greater weight to acquisition of information technology (particularly higher speed access to the Internet), giving more "free time" to staff to access resource sites, and providing input from their organization to the operators of these sites.

The second major implication is that perhaps non-profits may move into new inter-organizational collaborative relationships that are not defined by contractual alliances among their organizations or by mandates from funders or regulators. These "informational alliances" offer the possibility of freer, more flexible, and more innovative coalitions; in fact, there may be some possibility that traditional "community" coalitions will themselves be changed to some degree as these "information alliance"-based coalitions exert more dominance in the non-profit world.

Third, an implication that follows from the first two, is that non-profits may move toward

transcending national boundaries. While speculative, the authors strongly believe that the advent of these resource sites combined with other technology innovations (most importantly accurate, real time translation from one language to another of text in a web site) will tend to create information alliances that sit on top of national boundaries. These may well provide a tremendous boost to the non-profit world in dealing with power-relationships within countries.

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