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Sharing Resource Databases

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Sharing Resource Databases

Nancy Shank, Associate Director, University of Nebraska Public Policy Center

AIRS is working to make it easier for I&Rs to share information with each other. In the past, I&Rs largely needed to use the same software product to routinely share information -- but even that approach has been fraught with problems. As I&Rs position themselves as key information sources in their communities, many are increasingly interested in easily providing their resource information to others, such as Continuum of Care organizations that are developing Homeless Management Information Systems across the U.S. AIRS has been working to enable data sharing across software products through a number of important initiatives:

Creating the AIRS XML Standard

This standard identifies the minimum information that vendors should ensure their software programs can export. The standard uses Extensible Markup Language (XML). XML is an internationally-recognized language that enables coding of data elements that developed by the World Wide Web Consortium. XML is widely-used as the language for creating interoperability standards across many sectors of the economy. The **AIRS XML** standards uses XML, then, to create a highly-customized application for I&R information exchange. The AIRS XML current version is 2.03 and may be found at: <http://www.ne211.nebraska.edu/vendorinformation.htm>. A number of major vendors are in the forefront of accommodating the standard into their software products so that their clients may easily create data exports to share resource information. The 2005 AIRS Conference will include special recognition of these vendors in moving the I&R community forward in information sharing.

Standardizing processes

The XML creates exports, but true interoperability also requires that the information within the export is standardized to some extent. There are two AIRS initiatives that will assist I&Rs in standardizing processes. The first, a subcommittee of the Technology committee is developing the **AIRS XML Best Practices Guide**. The Guide describes each of the AIRS XML elements and outlines interoperability considerations about how the data is entered. For example, the AIRS XML specifies that service area be exportable, but does not define how service area should be defined. Some I&Rs may use ZIP codes, others may use counties or regions, etc. Secondly, the long-standing **AIRS INFO LINE Taxonomy of Health and Human Services** is central to indexing resources. I&Rs sharing information should agree, not only to use the taxonomy, but also on the minimum depth and use of that taxonomy. For an excellent review see: Bruni, M. (2000). Indexing with the AIRS/INFO LINE Taxonomy of Human Services. *Information & Referral*, 22, 83-109, and Sales, G. (2003).

Exporting and Managing the Merged Data

Means that the shared information is combined and managed in a way that will result in a useable data set. AIRS and numerous I&Rs and vendors are collaborating with the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center on a U.S. Department of Commerce Technology Opportunities Program grant (#31-60-I03013) to develop a **tool** that will perform data quality checks, de-duplication, and geo-coding for data merging. This tool will be publicly-available and will interface with AIRS XML-compliant exports. It is expected that the tool will be available by Fall 2005.

These initiatives will enable data sharing of valuable resource information. The impressive progress that has been made is due to the efforts of: **many** dedicated AIRS members serving on the XML Workgroup subcommittees, vendors, foundational work by the Michigan Association of United Ways, and many other champions and experts.

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