

Public Health Outreach Project Description

Title: Southern Regional Information Access for Public Health Professionals Project

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Organization: Southern Regional Area Health Education Center, 1601 Owen Drive, Fayetteville, NC 28304

Date: 1998-2001

Objectives:

1. Enhance the current level of Internet access at each county health department through upgrades to hardware and provide additional Internet user accounts for staff.
2. Provide training to health department personnel that focuses on the use of PubMed, Internet Grateful Med, Loansome Doc, CDC Internet resource services and the Internet for health information research.
3. Promote the services of NLM, NN/LM, CDC, and SR-AHEC Information Access Center through presentations and exhibits to regional boards of health, public health organizations and alliances and through publication regional print media.
4. Establish a regional public health Web site to act as an Internet gateway to health information, as an avenue of communication for the public health community and as a link to community-based undergraduate and graduate medical and health education students and minority Family Practice residents.
5. Provide document delivery service to each public health department through NLM's Loansome Doc service.

Target Audience:

This project targets health professionals on staff at each of the nine public health departments in the SR-AHEC region. The nine-county region is rural, poor, and medically underserved. Per capita income for this region is \$17,708, or \$3,371 less than state average. In addition, about 65% of the region's population is minority due to a significant Native American base and increases in the Hispanic population.

Needs assessment (methodology and results):

Baseline data was collected from each health department director. During preliminary information sessions, a baseline survey questionnaire was circulated to health department staff asking about their current level of Internet usage and their familiarity with specific Web resources. Changes in the covered indicators which are attributable to the interventions will be the basis for project evaluation in part.

Two presentations were developed to satisfy the information needs of public health department professionals. The first dealt with fundamentals of the Internet including features of Web browsers, formulation of search strategies, search engines and other Web resource types, and evaluation of information quality. The approach was necessarily broad due to the range of specialties and skill levels among attendees. The second focused on medical information on the Internet. Trainers discussed Medline and Loansome Doc in detail together with overviews of specific Web sites such as CDC, and of medical search engines.

Intervention:

A series of two-hour presentations were offered to varied audiences of public health professionals. The intent of trainers was to provide Basic Internet followed shortly thereafter by Health Information on the Internet. PowerPoint® was the means of introducing course content. The methods were demonstration, hands-on, and exercises. Facilities at the various sites determined whether all methods were employed.

Sixty training sessions were conducted for multi-specialty public health audiences between April and November 1999. There were 571 total participants. Public health nurses were the most numerous type, followed by social workers, environmental health specialists, nutritionists and dietitians, health educators, translators and interpreters, and laboratory and X-ray technicians. Three public health directors attended; 2 physicians, 1 physician assistant, 1 dentist, 2 dental hygienists, and 2 hospital administrators also attended. Administrative staff of various types were the largest overall classification.

Training and other materials developed:

PowerPoint® slides:

- Introductory Sessions, 20 slides (3/99)
- Basic Internet, 36 slides (4/99)
- Health Information on the Internet, 24 slides (5/99)

Health Websites – a 4 page list of Web sites selected by Rebecca Johnston, MLS, and categorized by topic and health specialty was distributed to each participant

Website (developed as part of project and how maintained):

- <http://publichealth.sr-ahec.org/InformationResources.htm> A selected list of public health links sorted by categories such as infectious diseases, consumer health, clinicians' resources, minority health, etc.
- <http://publichealth.sr-ahec.org/projectinfo.htm> Southern Regional Information Access for Public Health Professionals Project explanatory page

- <http://publichealth.sr-ahec.org/Bladen/index.htm> Bladen County Health Department's project Web page. Shows health services, hours of operation, and contacts.
- <http://publichealth.sr-ahec.org/Cumberland/default.htm> Cumberland County Health Department's project Web site. Multiple pages cover hours of operation, services including educational activities, local sanitation grades, board of health contacts, health tips, and CCHD programmatic activities such as Smart Start.
- <http://publichealth.sr-ahec.org/Hoke/index.htm> Hoke County Health Department's project Web page. Features hours of operation, services, and contacts.
- <http://publichealth.sr-ahec.org/Moore/index.htm> This page is simply a link to Moore County's own Web site of which the health department is a part.
- <http://publichealth.sr-ahec.org/Richmond/Richmond.htm> Richmond County Health Department's project Web page. Provides hours of operation, services, and contacts complete with email addresses.
- <http://publichealth.sr-ahec.org/Robeson/index.htm> Robeson County Health Department's project Web page. Shows hours of operation, services, classes, and contacts.
- <http://publichealth.sr-ahec.org/Sampson/index.htm> Sampson County Health Department's project Web page. Reports hours of operation, services, contacts, ongoing classes, and classes available by request.
- <http://publichealth.sr-ahec.org/Scotland/index.htm> Scotland County Health Department's project Web page. Features hours of operation, services and contacts, and explanatory information about services.

Since the project is continuing through August 2001, one of the goals is to upgrade the content of some of these sites and pages. Factors such as management commitment, health department liaison's skills, and time available for Web site development determine content and extent of usefulness. One of the goals of the project extension on the part of Southern Regional AHEC's software specialist Eleanor Felton is to work more closely with departmental contacts to enhance the value of their Web presence to users.

Content of the selected public health Web pages is checked periodically for working links. Web pages for the individual health departments are updated as new content is provided.

Evaluation (methodology and results):

After each of the preliminary informational sessions, baseline survey questionnaires were distributed to each attendee. The questionnaire deals with the level of familiarity with computers and Internet applications, degree of access, and knowledge of specific public health Web sites. When asked to indicate whether they used these resources *regularly*, *sometimes*, or *never*, most respondents answered *never*. *Sometimes* was chosen much less frequently followed by only a few replies of *regularly*. Most respondents reported that they

had access to a computer *in the health department building* rather than in their offices or that they had access *at home*. When asked specifically about use of CDC, ASTHO, NACCHO, and National Library of Medicine Web sites, most respondents answered they *never* used them.

At the conclusion of each training session, attendees received an evaluation form modified from the Special Library Association's ten-question course evaluation. Impressions of course content, the presentation, and overall satisfaction were ranked on a five-letter scale with (A) being the highest and (E) being the lowest. Most respondents at all sites selected (A) or (B). Trainers did note greater dissatisfaction among groups of 15 or more which was attributed to limitations on the level of assistance the trainers could provide to participants. This view was supported by an eleventh question SR AHEC evaluators added which asked participants for recommendations for improving the course. Although responses were generally positive as indicated by the general comment, "Lots of productive information, thank you!", other responders felt differently. One advised: "There was too much to learn" about in Health Information on the Internet. Another perceived "Too many people at different levels."

Poster Sessions/Exhibits/Presentations/Publications:

The *Southern Regional Information Access for Public Health Professionals Project* was featured in an article published in *AHEC Review*:

Farlow, P. Internet Access for Rural Health Professionals. *AHEC Review*. 1999 Fall:4,10.

Partnerships:

The implementation of the Web sites associated with this project required Southern Regional AHEC to establish liaisons with each of the nine county health departments for the purpose of determining Web content. Health department directors identified a member of their staff to cooperate on the creation of their Web site with SR AHEC's software support specialist.

SR AHEC worked closely with the North Carolina AHEC Programs' Central Office to publicize the project.

Marketing:

In addition to publicizing the project in the Fall 1999 *AHEC Review* as cited above, preliminary informational sessions were held in the nine county health departments between February and April 1999. During these informational sessions, major goals of the project were reviewed with the directors and/or senior management. The target population was specified as were the contributions expected of the health departments, and computer equipment (hardware, software, and ISP connections) needs were identified for each health department. The training plan was described and an appropriate location for the "library" workstation was determined.

Administrative issues:

The support of the health department directors for this project ensured cooperation of their respective staffs. Such support was necessary for the establishment of computer and Internet use policies where they did not exist already. Even though the desire to cooperate existed at each of the health department sites, workloads and levels of staffing at the various departments were a factor. This was particularly evident in scheduling time for Web site development.

Challenges Faced:

- Scheduling in general was a concern due to the desire that participants have the second training session reasonably close to the first to aid in retention and mastery of skills.
- Levels of participation varied from site to site. Many sites had multiple sessions with participation in the teens and twenties however some sites had sessions of only 3 to 4 participants. Ideally, multiple sessions at the latter sites could have been consolidated.
- As previously stated, health department staff were involved in other activities or were sometimes only minimally available for Web site development.
- There have been no Loansome Doc requests as a result of the training.

Were Project Objectives Met?

Project goals were and are being met. Computer equipment with Internet connections was placed in service, preliminary sessions to promote the project and secure cooperation of health directors were held, the project has been publicized in *AHEC Review*, and all training sessions have been held.

Since the project has been extended, there is additional time for use of the Internet and time to offer more staff training. Additional training will address the issue of Loansome Doc requests. Because evaluation is ongoing, investigators can try to determine if the lack of Loansome Doc requests to date is due to complexity of the retrieval process or some other factor. Additional time also means that content can be added to some health department Web sites to make them more useful to the communities they serve.

Sustainability:

Investigators foresee that health departments will be willing to continue ISP accounts after the conclusion of the project if staff use the Internet to obtain needed information. Additional training will aid in this outcome. Increasing utilization of the Web by the public will enhance the value of each department's Web presence.

Anecdotes or Other Observations:

- Facilities and numbers of participants at each site have a direct bearing on the success of training and the quality of the learning experience.

- Progressive health directors who incorporate this project's goals into other initiatives influence the level and degree of participation among their staff.
- Acceptance of project goals by the health director is key to the spread of Internet use throughout the various levels of staff in the department.