

Public Health Outreach Project Description

Title: Chicago Environmental Public Health Outreach Project (CEPHOP)

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Objectives: 1) Design a public health network in Chicago to improve access to environmental public health information resources by public health professionals working at the local level. 2) Improve access to information resources allowing health centers, local organizations and schools to implement the CDC's public health programs.

Target Audience: All individuals and groups served by the participating health centers, community-based organizations and schools.

Needs assessment (methodology and results): Discussions were held with the various groups to ascertain information needs and questionnaires were distributed to measure level of computer search skills. Results showed that the key areas of interest were asthma and lead poisoning in children. Computer skills varied widely.

Intervention: Computers with software to access the Internet were purchased and installed at all the sites. Classes to teach PubMed and Internet search skills were scheduled at both UIC and the individual sites using a "train the trainer" model. A listserv was established as a communication tool for the sites to support each other and exchange information.

Training and other materials developed: A handbook covering the following subjects was compiled and distributed to all site liaisons: Basic MEDLINE, Advanced MEDLINE, Basic Internet Searching, Advanced Internet Searching, and Web Page Development (optional).

Website (developed as part of project and how maintained): A Website was established with links to the CEPHOP sites, environmental and public health information, medical information, government information, Chicago area public health information, resources for kids, teens and parents, and public health information in Spanish. It is maintained on the UIC server and is available at: <http://www.uic.edu/depts/lib/projects/resources/cephop/chicago.html>

Evaluation (methodology and results): Evaluations were distributed at the end of each training session. A final focus group was held with the site liaisons near the end of the project to determine if anticipated results were achieved, if expectations were met, what could have been improved, what were impediments

to success and what worked. Following this meeting additional steps were taken to meet some of these expressed needs.

Poster Sessions/Exhibits/Presentations/Publications: A poster session was presented at the annual conference of the Midwest Chapter meeting of the Medical Library Association held in Cincinnati, Ohio on September 22-26, 2000. The presenters had conversations with other outreach librarians who had encountered similar challenges, frustrations and successes.

Partnerships: A physician from Cook County Hospital's department of Family Practice served as co-PI, with the PI and the outreach coordinator being librarians from UIC's Library of the Health Sciences. Each of the seven sites, which included Chicago public schools, grass-roots organizations, and hospital sponsored health centers, was represented by a liaison. Although it was hoped that these sites would form partnerships to strengthen each other's efforts, this did not prove to be the case.

Marketing: The sites were entrusted with the responsibility to promote and market the project to their constituency. This proved to be problematic in several cases. One public school was placed on academic probation by the Chicago Board of Education due to poor academic performance of its students. The project assumed less importance while the school attempted to regain an acceptable academic standing. One of the health centers had difficulty promoting the project because they had no place to set up the computer where clinicians could use it. Another site had problems in providing a secure environment and telephone line for the computer so they were not able to advertise its availability.

Administrative issues: Both the Principle Investigator and the Outreach Coordinator left the University during the first year of the project. This necessitated the appointment of both a new PI and Coordinator who had not participated in the original design or planning of the project. Both these librarians had to acquaint themselves with the philosophy and history of the project, visit all the sites, establish trust, evaluate the needs and progress of each site, and determine future directions.

The initial contractor for Internet access who had been paid in advance, stopped providing this service. Their stated intent was to forward the funds to another provider in order to have a seamless transfer of service. Months of negotiating by UIC's business office with both the old and new providers to successfully transfer the funds proved frustrating, time consuming, and in some cases, fruitless.

Challenges Faced:

- Self-appraisal at the sites of computer expertise during the needs assessment was too subjective to be meaningful and basic computer skills of the trainees fell below the librarians' expectations.

- The sites did not have enough technical support available to them when computers or software presented problems. The technical difficulties encountered were often beyond the expertise of the librarians to fix.
- Because some of the grass-roots organizations operated on such a limited budget, it took a long period of time for some of them to obtain a telephone line for Internet access.
- Not all sites-liaisons shared the same vision of the project.
- Roles of the PI and outreach coordinator were spelled out in the proposal, but not those of the sites.
- The project was not based on any learning theory.
- Part-time and volunteer staff at some sites made scheduling of classes difficult or they did not come to scheduled sessions at their site.
- Basic computer skills had to be taught at some sites before teaching searching skills could be attempted.
- Trust had to be reestablished between sites and librarians once the original librarians left the project and were replaced.
- Some sites did not have the personnel resources available to devote time to the project.

Were Project Objectives Met? All the explicit objectives put forth by the librarians were met, but the larger aim of creating a network of public health workers was not. Hence all the specific tasks enumerated to attempt to reach this goal were accomplished without the larger goal being met.

Sustainability: Those sites with dynamic leaders on their staff are likely to continue using the resources provided to advance the goals of their organizations. Others will do so with varying levels of success. The website continues to be maintained by UIC.

Anecdotes or Other Observations:

- It is important that sites choose their liaison with care. Liaisons are key to the success of the project since they link the outreach librarian with the workers at the sites. Merely having computer skills is not enough, but some computer savvy is necessary. Understanding the work of the organization is necessary as is a sharing of the vision of the project
- A clear statement of what each participant will do to make the project a success should be articulated at the start so that all activities necessary to make the project a success will be attended to.
- Providing computers and communication software is not sufficient for success. The sites should have a plan for how they will use the computers and the information accessed. The librarians cannot impose this upon them but there can be mutual exploration of the information available on the Internet and how it can enhance the work already being done by the project sites.

- Computers glitches are inevitable and grass-roots organization will probably lack the technical support enjoyed by those working in an academic environment. Librarians proficient in providing searching skills may not have the expertise necessary for more complex fixes. If outside technical support is necessary, money must be made available for this service.
- In assessing computer skills definitions as vague as “beginner” or “advanced” are useless since they mean different things to everyone involved. If participants lack basic computer skills, they need to learn them to become self-sufficient searchers.
- Know your constituents. While this may be stating the obvious, it is difficult to achieve for many reasons. Librarians may be viewed as “outsiders” and establishing trust can be difficult. Site liaisons or staff may feel uncomfortable in acknowledging their lack of computer expertise in front of these outsiders. Different assumptions about the use of information may unconsciously exist. Librarians may be tempted to teach what they know (MEDLINE) rather than what the sites need to know. Much groundwork needs to be laid at the beginning of the project so that all parties fully understand what the goals of the project are, agree upon mutually acceptable ways of achieving these goals, and can establish a trusting relationship to work out difficulties encountered.
- The academic world in which outreach librarians work will be very different from that inhabited by grass roots organizations, schools or clinics. Volunteer staff may bring a different attitude to work and time than those who are paid. Grass roots organizations often have different views, opinions and goals than those found in the academic world. Participants need to be aware that these differences exist so communication between them is as clear as possible
- Base the approach of the project upon an appropriate theory. Theories of outreach and learning exist which are based upon the research and experience of others. Building upon the knowledge that already exists will help guide a project to a successful conclusion with a minimum of false steps.