

WHAT IS THE AIRS/211 LA COUNTY TAXONOMY AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?

“The value of knowledge is largely tied to the way in which that knowledge is organized. If you can’t find it, it’s not likely to be of much use to you.”

Marc Rapport
Unfolding Knowledge
Knowledge Management E-zine

Taxonomies are sophisticated tools that help people find the information they need. They are a type of a controlled vocabulary, a standardized set of terms and phrases that are used to index and retrieve information about a particular subject in a systematic, unambiguous way. Control is exerted in the careful identification of concepts, selection of preferred wording for term names and organization of the terms in a logical framework. New terms are only added when it is clear that a relevant concept has been identified for which there is no current term.

People use classification systems in many everyday situations without even realizing it. When you use the card catalog in the library to find the topic you are interested in, you are using the Dewey Decimal Classification system, the indexing structure the library system has adopted to organize its books by their subject matter. When you look for a dry cleaner in an online business directory, the headings that are used to organize the information constitute another type of classification system. The Sunday edition of your paper uses yet other kinds of indexing structures to present their weekly calendar of arts and entertainment events and to organize their want ads.

So what is “our” Taxonomy? The AIRS/211 LA County Taxonomy of Human Services is the classification system used by the field of information and referral to index and access information about organizations that provide community services based on the types of organizations they are (hospital, adult school, library), the services they provide and the people they serve.

- ✓ It is a tool more than 30 years in the making. Work on the Taxonomy began in 1983 and its development is ongoing.
- ✓ The Taxonomy creates an infrastructure for human services databases including those maintained by 2-1-1 systems and statewide aging and ADRC systems as well as HMIS systems, disability related I&R services and specialized programs in other areas.
- ✓ The Taxonomy provides a “common language” for human services which facilitates:
 - Sharing among organizations that provide information to the public;
 - Comparable call reporting (information about what people need); and
 - Consistent searching from one community to another. A family in Texas, for example, can search for resources in California for an aging parent and have a common frame of reference. And I&R services handling overflow disaster related calls in an unfamiliar community can do their jobs better if disaster resources are indexed using Taxonomy terms that are familiar.
- ✓ The Taxonomy is used internationally. It has three different views called “locales” which represent the language in which a term and associated data elements appear (currently English and French) and the domain of application (currently the U.S. and Canada).
- ✓ The Taxonomy applies to all segments of the economy: nonprofit, for-profit and government agencies.
- ✓ As a “human services” classification system, the Taxonomy applies to all service sectors. The goal is to have sufficient breadth and depth to meet the needs of both comprehensive and specialized databases. The definition for “human services” formally adopted by AIRS is as follows:

The activities of human services professionals that help people become more self-sufficient, prevent dependency, strengthen family relationships, support personal and social development and ensure the well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities. Specific human services include ensuring that people have access to adequate food, shelter, clothing and transportation; financial resources to meet their needs; consumer advice and education; criminal justice or legal services; education and employment; health and mental health care including substance abuse services; and environmental protection, both routinely and in times of disaster or other emergencies. Human services also facilitate the capabilities of people to care for children or other dependents; ensure that protective services are available to those who are vulnerable; provide for the support of older adults and people with disabilities; offer social, religious and leisure time activities; provide for the cultural enrichment of the community; and ensure that people have the information they need to fully participate in community life.¹

- ✓ The Taxonomy can be customized to meet the unique needs of communities. The filters function allows subscribers to deactivate the terms they don't want to use and to download the filtered set to provide a structure for organizing resource information on a website focus page or portal, or to set active/inactive flags for the Taxonomy terms in their database in order to "hide" terms for services not included in their system.
- ✓ Licensed Taxonomy users in the U.S. and Canada are supported by online communities set up on the AIRS Networker at <http://airsnetworker.airs.org> which include peer-based discussion groups that are used by resource staff to raise questions that often result in the creation of new terms or the clarification of existing ones. Their experience "on the ground" has been an essential reality check for Taxonomy growth and development. Such user warrant² is broadly acknowledged as a powerful means of validation for controlled indexing vocabularies giving us a recognized quality assurance tool. The extensive research we have conducted to support the evolution of the Taxonomy lends additional credibility in the form of "literary warrant"³.
- ✓ The Taxonomy has been widely endorsed and adopted. Most notably for our purposes, it is referenced in the AIRS Standards and its use is required for AIRS accreditation. There is an interesting story about AIRS and their endorsement. During a plenary session at the Chicago conference in 1989 where participants were invited to address the Board, a woman stood up and described the confusing array of classification systems being used in the field. With a great deal of indignation, she said: "We can't talk to one another about services that are available in our communities, the types of calls we are getting or service gaps. Can't AIRS do something about it?" The timing was great... the first edition of the Taxonomy, published in 1987, was gaining notice and we were in discussions with AIRS at the time about an endorsement. You could say that the rest is history...

A global market leader in recruitment, training and consulting for the knowledge, information and data industries, observed that, for them:

"...the primary motives for developing an internal taxonomy were to improve information access and to save time by streamlining the search process."

Improving information access and saving time in the search process are two benefits we hope the AIRS/211 LA County Taxonomy is successfully providing for organizations that use it.

¹ Adapted from the definition of "Social Work" in *the Dictionary of Social Work* published by the National Association of Social Workers.

² "User Warrant" is the use of keyword searches by or requests from users as a justification for including a concept in a classification system or selecting particular wording as the preferred wording for a term.

³ "Literary Warrant" is justification for the inclusion of a concept in an indexing language or for the selection of a preferred term based on its frequent occurrence in the literature.