

The People's Guide to Human Services: Assuring Success in Public Web Searches

Goals and limitations of the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy

The AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy is a comprehensive classification system for human services designed for Information and Referral professionals. It seeks to provide a single, precise, meticulously defined code for every unique human service. Because AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy codes are precise and well-defined, they are well suited to clarifying the nuances and fine distinctions needed to connect clients with exactly the right service.

One of the rules of the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy classification system is that a taxonomical category should have only one place within the taxonomy's categorical hierarchy and should not be duplicated. This means there is *only one path* to any given topic. Because of this, individuals need training in how to use the taxonomy's organizational principles. For this reason, AIRS sponsors taxonomy classes for Information and Referral professionals.

The AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy is not intended for use by novices. Several of its constraints are not compatible with its use by the general public. A taxonomy for the general public must be intuitive; its structure immediately apparent; it must afford multiple paths to common topics; and it must use language that favors ease of understanding over professional precision.

The People's Guide to Human Services: multiple codes, multiple paths, quick access to popular topics

North Light developed the *People's Guide to Human Services* as a public-access hierarchical classification system for use by untrained individuals who have probably never encountered a taxonomy. Because it's not intended as a precise classification system, it provides **multiple codes** for topics that are popular or likely to be approached in different ways by different users. Since, in some cases, the chances of successfully finding a topic are increased dramatically if that topic is in **more than one path**, the *People's Guide* also presents more than one path to the same topic.

Here's an example: Emergency Food in the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy has counterparts in the *People's Guide* both under the FOOD path and under the EMERGENCIES AND DISASTERS path. In the FOOD path, it's coded under FOOD / Free, cheap food & meals / Emergency Food. In the EMERGENCY AND DISASTERS path, it's coded under EMERGENCIES and DISASTERS / Disasters and Major Storms / Preparing for, surviving & coping with disaster / Preparing and surviving / Emergency Food. This dual positioning increases the likelihood of people coming across topics they might not have previously thought about. The Coping with Disaster section of the *Guide*, for example, has many topics that are repeated elsewhere in the general *People's* categories.

The People's Guide also **raises popular topics to higher levels**. The AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy orders its topics in logical groupings based on a comprehensive hierarchy of topics. While the *People's Guide* also uses a hierarchical structure, considerable effort was made to ensure that the most popular topics would not be located in the lower levels of the guide. Because citizens come to an Internet menu system with no preconception or previous training about where to look, the more quickly they come across a popular topic, the more likely they are to be successful.

Here's an example: Child care is a level 4 topic in the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy. Most users would find it difficult to locate child care by drilling down through the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy. First, they'd have to intuit that child care can eventually be found within "**Individual and Family Life**" rather than in Basic Needs or Income Support. Secondly, they'd have to guess that child care is deeper down within the level

two “**Individual and Family Support Services.**” Thirdly, they’d have to conjecture that child care is a sub-category within the “**Day Care**” branch of Family support services, rather than in one of more than thirty sub-categories of Family support services.

To solve this challenge for the public, the *People’s Guide* places child care as a level two topic in two locations—under “**Kids and Families**” and “**Work and Money.**” North Light’s research shows that these are far more likely locations for users to search for child care.

Accessible language

The AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy uses exquisitely precise language. Such precision requires words that are not part of the vocabulary of someone without a higher education. The *People’s Guide*, in contrast, uses 5th grade vocabulary wherever possible. While this is not always accomplished, particularly in the realm of medical terms and assistive technology, when it is accomplished, it makes the *People’s Guide* useable by a wider audience. Jargon is useful and appropriate for the professional who is seeking a precise service, but it is confusing and inappropriate for the lay person. To give but one example: in the *People’s Guide*, the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy term “Advocacy” is replaced by the phrase “Help getting benefits and services.”

Fewer topics, broader categories, a destigmatizing approach

The *People’s Guide* uses fewer topics than the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy in order to increase the odds that a given topic will have services in a given community. While the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy has over 5,000 codes, the *Guide* has, by design, less than 3,000 codes. The *People’s Guide* subsumes the most esoteric topics in the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy into broader categories so that average users will receive ample service result sets from their searches, without having to know arcane terminology.

The *People’s Guide* also creates a non-stigmatizing public menu system to offset any prejudice that only *certain* people in the community need help. To do this, the *People’s Guide* elevates non-stigmatized topics to higher and more visible positions than AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy does. Topics are more evenly distributed between ordinary and less ordinary or stigmatized ones. This means that individuals who might balk at identifying themselves as needing services will find non-threatening reasons to use the resource directory. Fun and Leisure, for example, is a level 1 topic in the *People’s Guide*.

Limitations of the keyword search for public web sites

Some may argue that the problem of novice users’ inability to locate a topic quickly within the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy can be solved by a keyword search. While this solution solves the problem of finding topics quickly, it does so by undermining the main purpose of having a hierarchical system in the first place.

A taxonomy, like a thesaurus, guides users into categorical themes – thereby exposing users to categories of service that they might not otherwise know to search for by manually entering a keyword. To argue that a keyword search makes the *People’s Guide* unnecessary implies that a keyword search makes the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy unnecessary as a public menu system as well. The logical conclusion of such arguments is that a Google style keyword search would be the *only* tool necessary for users to find the services they need. Yet such an argument overlooks the value of leading users into a hierarchical system where they might *discover* categories of service they didn’t know existed.

History of North Light’s *People’s Guide*

North Light, Inc. developed the *People’s Guide to Human Services* in 1998 as part of a contract to implement Resource House in the State of Iowa. Both the *People’s Guide* and the crosswalk between the *People’s Guide* and the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy were reviewed in detail in 1998 by Georgia Sales, author

of the AIRS/Infoline Taxonomy, who offered many valuable suggestions that were then incorporated into the final product. This assistance, while greatly appreciated, should not be construed as an endorsement of the *People's Guide* by AIRS, INFO LINE or Georgia Sales.

While other vendors may provide their customers with methods for creating informal public menu systems, North Light is not aware of any *formal* and *comprehensive* classification system—other than the *People's Guide*—that is primarily designed for use as a hierarchical menu for human services on a **public** access system. [Public systems, it should be noted, are not the primary focus of AIRS.]