

What is the AIRS/211 LA County Taxonomy and Why is it Important?

The AIRS/211 LA County Taxonomy of Human Services (formally titled *A TAXONOMY OF HUMAN SERVICES: A Conceptual Framework with Standardized Terminology and Definitions for the Field*) provides a conceptual framework for approaching human services. Because it was originally designed for use by INFO LINE of Los Angeles (now 211 LA County) within the confines of Los Angeles County, the first edition, published in 1987, had a distinctly “California” feel. In recognition that the *Taxonomy* was a tool that would be useful to other professionals, the original print run was large enough to accommodate other interested parties. By 1991, when the second edition became available, more than 450 organizations throughout the United States and Canada had purchased copies. A survey of early supporters revealed diverse utilization patterns. In addition to its primary intended function as an organizing structure for information and referral resource files, people were using the *Taxonomy* as a dictionary of human services, as a way of organizing reports regarding community needs, as a structure for conducting research, as a doorstop and as a means of coordinating requests for grants for human service projects.

It quickly became apparent that the *Taxonomy* was more than just another classification system. During the years since its original publication, the semantic disarray in the human services field had become increasingly obvious. The lack of a common language contributes to duplication of effort in service delivery and to widespread confusion about the availability of specific services. Beyond this, it creates barriers to those seeking services as well as difficulties for I&R programs attempting to provide access to these services.

Different organizations (and even different people within the same organization) use different terminology to describe identical services, and just as often use the same terminology to describe services that are very different. *Counseling*, *counselling* (the correct spelling in Canada), *psychotherapy* and *therapy*, for example, may all be used to describe essentially the same service. But *therapy* may not be specific enough to accurately pinpoint its meaning. In addition to being a synonym for “counseling”, *therapy* may refer to a variety of physical rehabilitation services. Similarly, *AIDS* (the health condition), *aids* (as in *mobility aids*) and *aides* (as in *classroom aides* or *home health aides*) need to be distinguished based on the context in which they are used. People in information and referral wanted a solution and asked that one be developed.

The need for standardized terminology was also articulated by organizations that wanted to gather and share statistics about: (1) the needs of individuals who call for assistance; and (2) the relative ability of their communities to respond to those needs. The summary of individual needs over time provides a useful picture of the collective needs of the community and helps to identify service gaps and service gluts. If agencies within a community, a region or across the country have a common way of indexing, accessing and summarizing agency and inquirer information, they are in a better position to share data about needs and resources and to establish more effective relationships for cooperative service funding, delivery and reporting.

The Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS), the professional association of information and referral providers throughout North America, recognized in the first edition of *Taxonomy* a solid foundation for the common language for human services the field was requesting. A common language provides for common concepts, common terminology for naming services and agreements regarding definitions for what a service involves. Having a common language provides communities with the following:

- The ability to identify appropriate resources for specific inquirers.
- The ability to collect and share statistical information at a useful summary level.
- A reliable way to identify service gaps.
- A sound basis for allocating scarce monetary resources.
- The ability to work collaboratively with other service providers.
- A strong foundation for shared database cooperatives.

211 LA County made it clear that it was willing to be responsive to the needs of users and to continue to modify the structure and contents of the *Taxonomy* to ensure that it fulfilled the diverse needs of human services professionals throughout North America. The initial development work was complete and maintenance was guaranteed. A concerted effort was made to obtain input from a wide spectrum of users,

and the resulting second edition document had a significantly broader appeal. The AIRS Board endorsed the *Taxonomy* and agreed to co-publish the revised edition. United Way of America also endorsed the *Taxonomy*. 211 LA County has continued to follow through with its commitment to broaden the scope of the *Taxonomy* and make its application more universal.

Today the *Taxonomy*:

- Is used by information and referral providers throughout North America.
- Is mandated by the *Standards for Professional Information & Referral* published by AIRS and its use is required by organizations seeking AIRS accreditation. Standard 8 of the reads: "The I&R service shall use a standard service classification system to facilitate retrieval of community resource information, to increase the reliability of planning data, to make evaluation processes consistent and reliable, and to facilitate national comparisons of data."
- Has been endorsed by United Way of America.
- Has been endorsed by FLAIRS/NYSAIRS/CAIRS and other AIRS Affiliates.
- Is available in a Canadian version that has endorsed by InformCanada as the pan-Canadian classification system for information and referral/211 organizations across the country.
- Has been mandated by HUD for use in the Homeless Information Management Systems (HMIS) it funds.
- Has been recognized by the National Association of State Units on Aging (NASUA) as a valuable tool for use by the aging field.
- Is incorporated in all of the major I&R software packages on the market.