

Section 1. Basic Activities

Basic Services

The information center, as described here, is one which systematically identifies, obtains, organizes, and provides its clients access to all the relevant information on a particular topic. It may hand-deliver materials to a client's desk or respond via telephone, fax, mail, or e-mail.

The information center is proactive. It tries to anticipate the needs of its users, not just respond. It actively publicizes its services and simplifies access for clients. It provides an actual answer to a question, not just a bibliography or a book in which the answer may be found — unless, of course, that is what the client wants.

Many community organizations distribute informational materials as a part of their public education efforts. Generally this information is not indexed and stored in the center. These organizations are *distribution centers* offering primarily distribution of materials and are not information centers of the type focused on in this document.

Targeted Users

An information center will have a targeted set of people to whom its services are tailored and directed. These groups may include some or all of the following:

Students	Staff within the sponsor organization
Teachers	Staff of other organizations
Health care workers	Business leaders
Government officials	Researchers
General public	

The information center needs to carefully select the clients it intends to serve. This helps set priorities for selecting materials for the center as well as helping to define the particular services it will offer.

Information centers need to anticipate that they will be contacted by those outside their targeted set of users. In anticipation of these requests the center can identify other agencies or groups to whom such requests can be directed. Inevitably, at some point Alcohol and Other Drug (ATOD) Information Centers will be asked to provide medical advice. Or they will be asked to suggest a referral source for treatment. These requests are typically beyond the scope of the center's expertise and not part of its services. However, again, this does not mean that the center cannot be helpful. On such occasions the person may be referred to a hotline or

other program that does provide referrals or the individual may be invited to browse in a directory of treatment programs.

An important goal of the information center is never to send a user away empty handed. If the center doesn't have what the user is looking for, the user should at least be given the phone number of a larger center that may be able to help or possibly the name of a person who might suggest a way of getting an answer.

Information centers can offer a range of services. The specific services a particular center offers will vary. The particular constellation of services will depend upon the mission or purpose of the center – who it is intended to serve, what objectives it has in mind, the extent and type of other resources in the community, and what budget is available to the center.

Range of Services

Some of the basic services that a center may offer include:

Browsing Collection.

A collection of materials accessible to walk-in users. Collections located in private offices or with inadequate lighting or ventilation are generally not accessible.

Circulating Materials.

This service allows users to borrow materials such as books, videotapes, or reports from a center's collection.

Inter-Library Loan.

A center makes arrangements with another library or a library organization to secure materials that are not in its own collection. An inter-library loan system of cooperating libraries makes materials in one collection available to other libraries. A formal agreement that may include a fee schedule is often agreed upon by two or more libraries or among members of a library organization such as *Substance Abuse Librarians and Information Specialists (SALIS)*.

Document Delivery.

This service provides a user with a copy of a document that need not be returned. The user is not required to come to the center. Most commonly a photocopy of a relevant article or "handout" is provided. The center must follow the *fair use* guidelines specified by copyright law when providing photocopying services. Copyright law is discussed in *Section 5*.

Reference Service.

Reference service can be offered at several levels determined by the needs of the users and the goals of the center. Reference service can involve assistance to a user as s/he searches for an answer. Or reference service may mean a staff member locates information for a client without involving the user in the pro-

cess.

Some centers require users to come into the center to locate the information with minimal assistance. Other centers respond to telephone requests and hand deliver answers directly to a requester's desk.

Requests for reference services may range from locating a simple fact, such as "What is the per capita consumption of alcohol in New York state?" to assembling all that is available on a particular topic, such as would be necessary to respond to the question, "What is currently being done in the area of substance abuse treatment within the criminal justice system?"

The center's staff, in addition to locating the requested information, may also organize or cull it for the user.

Many centers provide different types of services to different groups of users. Thus, while a center may not lend materials to the general public, it may allow members of its own organization to borrow materials in its collection.

Services to some groups may be provided *gratis* because those groups are key to the goals and purpose of the center.

Fees for Selected Users

However, there are other potential users for the center's services. The center can serve these individuals and groups on a fee-for-service basis. Fee schedules can be established to cover the direct and indirect costs of providing services. On a fee-basis, or with adequate funding, the following additional services might be offered.

Information on Demand.

Analogous to reference services. The fee will reflect all the costs associated with delivering information to a user, including time spent searching databases and charges for photocopying or telephone/fax use.

Indexing Services.

Offered to clients who need professional assistance to organize a reprint collection, subject files, or other collection.

Current Awareness.

A periodic service that searches new serials and/or database updates to help clients stay abreast of developments in a subject of interest. An ATOD center might offer current awareness on "treatment outcome studies," "health care reform," "drug therapy for alcohol detoxification," or any topic requested. Results can be delivered by e-mail or in print.

Anticipating Needs of Targeted Users

It is imperative that a center be able to meet the information needs of its own organization before offering fee-based services, unless this is a specific mandate from the organization. The center should assume a proactive role within the organization and for its targeted users. It should anticipate their information needs and be prepared to offer desktop delivery of materials of interest. By doing this, the center becomes an important and integral component of the organization. The center should be highly visible, publicizing its services and the ways it can facilitate the work of others. If the services of the center are valued by the administrators of the organization, the value of the center's contribution to its targeted users will be better understood.

To assume a proactive role, the director must be knowledgeable of the activities and the issues of concern in the organization. S/he should arrange to attend meetings of project staff, editorial boards, and other meetings where organization issues and policy are discussed.

Activities that Facilitate Providing Services

Many information centers find the following activities helpful in providing basic services.

Preparing Handouts.

Virtually every center finds that it has a number of frequently asked questions. A center can save time by preparing handouts that address those issues. For example, the center can prepare annotated bibliographies of books, articles, and reports on a topic.

Handouts must be updated regularly if they are to be useful. Rather than creating its own handouts, if permission is obtained, a center may find it more economical to distribute handouts prepared by other organizations.

Assembling Information Packets.

Handouts may be assembled to create information packets on popular topics. Beyond their use in responding to specific questions, the packets may be used as a means of reaching out to groups or individuals.

Information packets are particularly useful in providing information to people who may hesitate to ask questions. Packets can also be useful in responding to teachers and health care workers who frequently contact the information center. These packets are most effective when they are directed at a particular audience.

When preparing information packets or handouts, it is important to include the date prepared or assembled and the name of the organization or individual that

prepared the materials. If materials from another center are used, it is important to obtain permission and give proper credit to those whose work is being distributed.

Collaborating with Others.

Sometimes called “networking,” this involves sharing resources and cooperating with others who provide information services. Such collaboration has many benefits. Cooperation among professionals can improve the services each provides. The specialized alcohol and other drug information center becomes better known and, thus, more available to potential users.

Collaboration among centers can also lead to sharing professional expertise and developing interlibrary loan agreements. Staff members can assist each other in professional development and training.

Training Staff of Other Information Centers and Libraries.

People often take their questions about addictions to non-specialized centers and libraries. Alcohol and other drug information centers can provide training on the addictions to the staff of other centers to enable them to respond more effectively. The addictions center can also develop information packets directed to information professionals in other organizations.

Community Outreach.

Providing pamphlets and posters to a neighborhood health fair or school program can be an important service to the broader community as well as a most effective means of publicizing the information center.

Professional Contacts.

Establishing and maintaining contacts among information and substance abuse professionals is an essential part of the center’s activities. This enables the center’s staff to remain current and knowledgeable both about developments in the addictions field and in information management. The center will benefit from sharing of information, development of inter-organizational and professional collaborative efforts, and even adoption of mutual standards to facilitate the use of information. Important activities include:

* Professional Memberships.

Maintaining active memberships in substance abuse and library organizations such as *Substance Abuse Librarians and Information Specialists (SALIS)*, *Special Libraries Association (SLA)* and *Medical Library Association (MLA)*. More information about these organizations is found in *Appendix A*. Memberships generally include a subscription to an association journal, opportunities to obtain other special publications, and opportunities to attend workshops and professional education meetings.

* Involvement in Professional Associations.

The value of a professional association lies, in large measure, with the willing-

ness of its members to be actively involved and to contribute to the organization. This can entail serving on a committee, thoughtfully responding to a survey sent out to members, or responding to informal requests from colleagues.

* Attendance at Professional Meetings.

Attending conferences, workshops, and professional meetings can be an important source of new ideas, information, and contacts.

Also of importance is providing feedback and comments to professional colleagues. One of the important things which professional colleagues do for one another is provide support, affirmation, and recognition for one's efforts in a fashion that neither users nor employers can do. This may involve comment upon materials that are particularly useful, meet a special need of a center, or represent a major effort.

Finally, too, there is a value in asking questions. A thoughtful question is as valuable as the answer it engenders. Something which is a concern or problem for you often represents a concern that is not unique to your circumstances. By voicing the question you may raise an issue that has broad interest to your colleagues.

Use of the Internet or Other Computer Network.

E-mail enables users to communicate and share information with colleagues virtually instantaneously. Beyond access to people, the Internet also offers access to a wealth of databases with bibliographical, statistical, and other kinds of information as well as a host of other services. For more information on the Internet see *Section 4*.

Suggested Reading

Webb SP. *Creating an Information Service*. London, England : Association for Information Management, 1985. 101 pp. ISBN: 0 85142 186 5.

Katz B (ed.). *The How-To-Do-It Manual for Small Libraries*. New York : Neal Schuman Publishers, 1987. 386 pp. \$39.95. ISBN: 1 55570 016 0.

Soper ME; Osborne LV; Zweizig. *The Librarian's Thesaurus: A Concise Guide to Library and Information Terms*. Chicago, IL : American Library Association, 1990. \$20 (Members \$18). 164 pp. ISBN 0 8389 0530 7.