

Sources of Information About Central Referral Systems

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This *Milemarkers* bibliography includes selected references on central referral system practices and research useful for developing and improving methods for ensuring that an individual or group obtains the supports or services necessary for information on central directories, information and referral systems, toll-free telephone numbers, call centers, First Call for Help (2-1-1), and single portal of entry systems are included.

Both a central directory, which focuses on sources of public and private resources and services that might provide support to parents, and a statewide toll-free telephone number to enable access to the resources are requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) regulations (Early Intervention Program, 34 C.F.R. § 303.301, 2002). According to the regulations, a central directory must be developed in a manner that enables parents to contact by telephone or letter any of the resources in the directory that they feel are important for their family or child to obtain. The information provided in the central directory and the availability of a toll-free telephone number to referral sources enables parents or community members to make a referral to early intervention for an infant or toddler who may be eligible for services.

The two characteristics that all central referral systems have in common are (1) a “door” that individuals enter (e.g., phone number, Web site, print directory) to access information and (2) a variety of resources, services, information, or goods available once they are “in the door.” The content of a central referral system can be developed for a broad audience (e.g., all community members) or a narrow audience (e.g., parents of children with developmental disabilities). Either can have more than one point of access (e.g., Web site, phone number, print directory).

A review of the central referral system literature finds that central directories and toll-free telephone numbers are but two types of central referral system practices that can be used to ensure access to services. The central referral system literature can be organized into several major categories of practice: central directories, information and referral systems, toll-free telephone numbers, call centers, First Call for Help (2-1-1) systems, and single portal or single entry systems. This *Milemarkers* includes selected references to research and practices in each of these categories that practitioners responsible for developing these types of referral systems should find informa-

tive and useful. Central referral systems are one type of referral activity (Dunst & Trivette, 2004) that constitutes the focus of research and practice at the Tracking, Referral and Assessment Center for Excellence (www.trace-center.info).

Central Referral Systems

Central Directories

Central directories are required by the IDEA regulations (Early Intervention Program, 34 C.F.R. § 303.301, 2002) and are developed for the express purpose of enabling parents of children with disabilities to have a central place where they can identify available services and obtain contact information for those resources. Most state and local central directories were first developed as printed directories organized alphabetically or categorically. With the development of the internet, many states and communities now have posted their directories on the World Wide Web, allowing families to scroll through a directory’s contents and print all or part of the directory (California Department of Developmental Services & WestEd Center for Prevention and Early Intervention, 2003).

Those responsible for developing or modifying an existing central directory on the Web should consider a number of factors, including Web design features (Eysen-

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bach & Kohler, 2002), organizational categories for referenced resources (Ozanne, Brucks, & Grewal, 1992), acceptable readability level of material (Lawrence, 2003), and use of various search options (Eysenbach & Kohler, 2002). A number of evaluations of the characteristics of useful central directories are now available (Cherry, Prebis, & Pick, 1995).

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directory of dentists found willing to treat disabled persons. *Journal of Public Health Dentistry*, 46, 161-163.

Information and Referral Systems

Information and referral systems provide information about public or private resources to citizens in most communities, often having a number of publications available. In many communities, libraries are the home of information and referral sources with the reference librarian often providing information about community resources (Pettigrew, Durrance, & Unruh, 2002). Evaluations of information and referral systems suggest that a variety of issues must be considered in developing a useful system. These issues include concerns of cultural relevance (Cabello-Argandona & Harc, 1977), organization of the information and resources (Pettigrew et al., 2002), and the language used to ensure the helpfulness of the information presented (Mitchell & Sloper, 2002). The reader is referred to the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (www.airs.org) and Ripley (1994) for information concerning the development of information and referral systems.

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Call Centers

Call centers are telephone helplines that provide a caller advice or information or that help make referrals for services. Call-center employees or volunteers speak directly to callers and attempt to understand and identify callers concerns or needs, determine the seriousness of the need, and provide advice, information, a service, or a referral depending on the evaluation of the need or concern. Over the last few years, call centers have become important components of health care systems (Rose, 1999) and key features of business systems (Dormann & Zijlstra, 2003). Evaluations of call centers have identified practice characteristics that influence the level of satisfaction and whether or not the caller acts on the information provided (Booth, Brown, & Richmond-Crum, 2004). There are, however, other features that need more investigation, such as the use of protocols to standardize and control the quality of responses (Blundon, 2003; Mayo, Chang, & Omery, 2002).

Blundon, W. (2003, April). Averting a call-center collision: Balancing automation and empowerment. *Customer Interaction Solutions*, 21, 68-69.

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Toll-Free Telephone Systems

The availability of a toll-free telephone number as a central source of information provides another avenue for an individual to obtain information about available services and resources. States are required to have a toll-free number that provides parents of young children and the general public access to an information and referral system as part of IDEA regulations (Early Intervention Program, 34 C.F.R. § 303.301, 2002). The reader is referred to Booth et al., (2004) for a recent evaluation of a statewide toll-free line operated by Maternal and Child Health Programs that highlights some of the challenges and strategies in implementing and maintaining an effective toll-free telephone information and referral system.

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First Call for Help (2-1-1)

First Call for Help (2-1-1) is a particular type of toll-free telephone system. Callers are connected to community resources for assistance that may meet their needs. The staff person assists the caller in obtaining help by accessing a comprehensive database that includes, but is not limited to, information about financial assistance, disability, education, employment, and health care. Having information about a service or resource in the database (e.g., ensuring that early intervention and special education preschool programs are included) and keeping the information updated (e.g., notifying First Call when contact information changes) are important activities to ensure appropriate referrals are received. There is an emphasis at the state and federal level to develop 2-1-1 systems, and the reader is referred to www.211.org for information about the development and financing of a community 2-1-1 system.

Alliance of Information and Referral Systems. (2004). *2-1-1 toolkit*. Fairfax, VA: Author.

Single Portal of Entry Systems

A single portal of entry or central referral is another type of program that helps individuals locate resources to meet their needs. These types of systems provide sole access to specific services in a community, acting as the clearinghouse for information and referral as well as a broker of needed services (Lynch, Mercury, DiCola, & Widley, 1988). Single portal of entry systems are developed to connect a person with a specific need to an individual or team of people who will help facilitate referral and access to specific programs. This type of referral system has been used in a variety of areas including early intervention and preschool special education, child care, and drug treatment programs. Evaluations have found some of these systems successful (Lynch et al., 1988); other evaluations have raised concerns regarding improving outcomes for individuals (Guydish, Woods, Davis, Bostrom, & Frazier, 2001).

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Summary

Central referral systems including central directories and toll-free telephone numbers, are required by IDEA regulations (Early Intervention Program, 34 C.F.R. § 303.301, 2002) as components of the state's comprehensive system and are designed to ensure parents quick and easy access to services for infants and toddlers who may be eligible for early intervention. This *Milemarkers*

includes selected references to practice descriptions and research on the characteristics of a variety of central referral systems found to be effective in linking people to the desired resources and services.

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