

History of Older Americans Act

The earliest recorded Information and Referral (I&R) Service -- for human service programs -- was reportedly established in 1921. Information and Referral services became more important in the 1960's and 1970's with growth in governmental and voluntary programs designed to assist frail, vulnerable and disadvantaged population groups.

The passage of the Older Americans Act (OAA) in 1965 affirmed the nation's highest sense of commitment to the well being of older persons. And, in 1973, amendments to the Older Americans Act required State and Area Agencies on Aging to develop and maintain I&R services within "reasonably convenient access to all older Americans."

With the Older Americans Act mandate for I&R Services firmly in place, the mid and late 1970s became a period in which policies and regulations were formulated. A series of policy memorandums in 1974 and 1975 that created the first minimum requirements for OAA I&R services also paved the way for two major Administration on Aging instructional guidebooks on information and referral. "Information and Referral: How To Do It" was a four volume series published in 1975 to provide guidelines for establishing and maintaining I&R services for older persons. In 1977, a program development handbook for State and Area Agencies on Aging entitled "I&R Service for the Elderly" was prepared. This handbook served for many years as the OAA guideline for I&R service development. A 1978 study by AIRS documented that 80% of all I&R services were designed specifically for older persons.

In the late 1980's, NASUA conducted a study, with AoA support, entitled "Towards A National Strategy to Enhance Information and Referral Systems for Older People". This study utilized representative focus groups with State and Area Agencies on Aging and local I&R providers to explore the role of I&R in assisting older persons, identifying deficiencies in I&R services, and offering viable recommendations for addressing these deficiencies. Four major areas of concern emerged from this study: quality of I&R operations; personnel and staffing requirements; access to I&R; and coordination among I&R systems. Many of the recommendations from this study were directed towards establishing a minimum and consistent level of service among all OAA I&R entities across the country. In 1988, NASUA completed a feasibility study and made recommendations to the U.S. Administration on Aging (AoA) for the establishment of a national toll-free access system aimed at assisting long distance caregivers to link to the most appropriate information source in the community where their older relatives resided.

As a result of these studies, in 1990 AoA launched its two-pronged National I&R Initiative: a) Eldercare Locator - a national 800 number - to provide consumer access to aging information resources nationwide and b) the National Aging I&R Support Center aimed at enhancing the quality of the aging I&R service delivery system.

In the early 1990s, the focus of the I&R Support Center was to facilitate statewide systems improvement plans and provide the tools essential for addressing the qualitative improvements in I&R systems design, operations, management and staff development. Towards this end, the Support Center developed separate OAA I&R standards, using the 1991 AIRS Standards as a foundation, to assist state units on aging in promoting professionalism. The National Standards for OAA I&R Services were published in 1993. The Support Center also developed a comprehensive training curriculum and assessment and implementation guides to assist agencies towards achieving the standards. As a result of these efforts, the aging network recognized the pivotal and unique role of I&R in the broader service delivery system and established a longstanding and visible partnership with AIRS, the leader in promoting professionalism in the field.

Since the original OAA Standards were first published, much has happened in the field to change how I&R services are offered. Technological advances, an increasingly diverse consumer population, and limitations on financial resources are only some of the trends that are encouraging collaboration. While in the early years, many programs maintained their resource information in card files, computerized databases are now the norm. In many areas, resource databases are web-based and shared among programs both within the aging network and between aging I&Rs and other I&R services. The National Family Caregiver Support Program (NFCSP) encouraged the OAA I&R specialist to recognize the complex set of needs related to both the caregiver and the care recipient. *Vision 2010* encouraged aging network information and assistance programs to not only coordinate with one another but also with the larger universe of information providers. As the sharing of resource information continues to increase, collaborative efforts between aging I&Rs and other programs will increase. The development of 211 call centers for access to community services is also driving enhanced collaboration among various I&R programs. While the provision of aging I&R continues to be specialized, these many advances require increased consistency in design and operation to maximize coordination and interface across I&R systems. Now more than ever, it is important for I&R specialists from diverse disciplines to be able to function from the same frame of reference.

In light of these trends, the Support Center re-examined the most effective approach for ensuring quality for the future and with input from the Administration on Aging, AIRS, and representatives from all levels in state aging networks, NASUA's membership determined that the OAA I&R system would be best served by utilizing the AIRS Standards for Professional Information and Referral. With the adoption of the AIRS Standards, the Support Center, with encouragement from state aging I&R networks, began to work with AIRS to develop the Certified Information & Referral Specialist in Aging program.

The aging network has come a long way since 1973 in providing effective I&R services. The many advancements that have occurred make it increasingly important that aging I&Rs demonstrate the highest professional skills to address the increasingly complex issues facing older people and their caregivers. Certification and the training

required to achieve this level of expertise is an important step in further professionalizing the aging I&R system.