

Strategies for Public Searches in the AIRS Taxonomy

The AIRS/211 LA County Taxonomy of Human Services is a hierarchical classification system and indexing tool for information and referral services. For the past 25 years, 211 of Los Angeles County has partnered with The Alliance of Information and Referral Systems (AIRS) to develop and maintain the AIRS Taxonomy. The Taxonomy has emerged as the standard for indexing and accessing human services resource databases. It contains more than 9,400 fully-defined terms and more than 24,000 cross-references, making it extremely comprehensive. Many Aging and Disability Resource Centers (ADRCs) and similar social service agencies subscribe to the AIRS taxonomy to organize their Information and Referral/ Assistance (I&R/ A) resource databases. Two “Aging and Disability Starter Sets” are available from AIRS - one for large communities and one for smaller communities. These starter sets have been refined to contain only the sections of the taxonomy that are relevant to ADRCs.

I&R/ A databases are often used by front-line staff to access information and assist consumers over the phone. In other cases, the databases are made available online for searches by the public. Different search strategies should be used to navigate the database, depending upon the type of user. For example, consumers and their family members who are in search of information about long-term supports and services may not be familiar with many of the terms used in the Taxonomy and they may also find the organization confusing or overwhelming. Some grantees have sought technical assistance to make their public databases more user-friendly.

It is important to note that public resource databases that follow the organization of the Taxonomy probably do not support a search algorithm that functions like Google, Yahoo!, or other common internet search engines. Taxonomy search results are often returned alphabetically or by alphanumeric code, not by an engine-specific ranking of “relevance.” Modifying a public resource database to make it more easily searched is usually the responsibility of a vendor or contractor who may be able to offer a range of potential solutions.

Four basic methods of searching the AIRS Taxonomy are generally available for use by the public:

- *Keyword search*
 - Users can enter a word or portion of a name to see all related taxonomy records.
- *Related Concept*
 - Users can select a broad concept like “Developmental Disabilities” or “Long-Term Care” to see related taxonomy terms.
 - This method is rarely used by vendors to program searchable public databases.
- *User-Defined Categories*
 - States or localities might want to develop their own collections of certain types of resources.
 - Some vendors allow for this level of flexibility, but not all.
- *Drilldown*
 - Users can browse expandable menus of Level 1 and Level 2 resource headings.
 - Beyond Level 2, sub-levels 3 through 5 of resources are displayed on the page.
 - This method is commonly in use in the field.

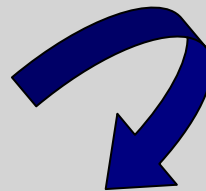
Example of a drilldown search in AIRS Taxonomy

Home » Drilldown Level 1

Select a term to see level 2 Taxonomy terms.

Level 1 Taxonomy Term

- [B Basic Needs](#)
- [D Consumer Services](#)
- [F Criminal Justice and Legal Services](#)
- [H Education](#)
- [J Environmental Quality](#)
- [L Health Care](#)
- [N Income Support and Employment](#)
- [P Individual and Family Life](#)
- [R Mental Health Care and Counseling](#)
- [T Organizational/Community/International Services](#)
- [Y Target Populations](#)

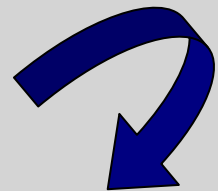


Home » Drilldown » B Basic Needs

Select a term to see all lower level Taxonomy terms.

Level 2 Taxonomy Term

- [BD Food](#)
- [BH Housing/Shelter](#)
- [BM Material Goods](#)
- [BR Temporary Financial Assistance](#)
- [BT Transportation](#)



Home » Drilldown » B Basic Needs » BD Food

There are 88 taxonomy records under BD Food. Select a taxonomy record to see its complete details.

Code	Name
BD	Food
BD-1500	Community Wide Food Storage Facilities
BD-1800	Emergency Food
BD-1800.1000	Brown Bag Food Programs
BD-1800.1900	Food Lines
BD-1800.2000	Food Pantries
BD-1800.2000-620	Occasional Emergency Food Assistance
BD-1800.2000-640	Ongoing Emergency Food Assistance
BD-1800.2250	Food Vouchers
BD-1800.2500	Government Surplus Food Distribution Sites

Several states and localities have undertaken significant efforts to make their resource databases more searchable and user-friendly. Their strategies may assist others in organizing, tagging, and linking their databases so that they can be searched easily by the public.

Strategies

- Creating links to the results of “Frequent Searches” or “Hot Topics” is an effective way to bring the most commonly accessed resources to the forefront.
- Programming keyword searches, synonyms, and “aliases” can provide alternative ways of finding resources. This strategy involves creating a cross-walk of related terms and building that information into the database.
- Tracking terms that consumers use to describe services and supports and making sure those terms are associated with the proper resources.
- Inserting terms not in the taxonomy, like specific program names (e.g. SenioRx), into the text description of a resource in order to be recognized by the search.

Lessons Learned:

- It is important to maintain the organization of the taxonomy and the resources within the database; states should plan to monitor data integrity as an ongoing process.
- In one state, providers can write their own entries for the database, but each one is edited and vetted by a specialist who ensures:
 - Appropriate literacy level
 - Acronyms are spelled out
 - Terms are in common usage, not overly formal, e.g. “services for seniors” instead of “services to elders”
- Limit the overall number of resource categories. One state was able to reduce their database from 236 categories to about 70.
- Survey the user community to see if your database is well-organized and successful or if they have suggestions for how it can continue to be improved.

Database Examples and Resources:

- <http://www.minnesotahelp.info>
- <http://www.nmresourcedirectory.org>
- <http://211taxonomy.org/>
- <http://211cleveland.org>
- <http://www.airs.org>

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