

United Way of Natrona County: Path Finder Project

I. PROJECT PURPOSE

Project Path Finder, the Natrona County Social Services Network, is a consortium of 20 social service providers located in Natrona County, Wyoming. With a population of 67,000, Natrona County encompasses a vast area in central Wyoming. It is in fact 495 square miles larger than the state of Connecticut. Geographically isolated from large population centers, Natrona County residents live 260 miles from Denver and 390 miles from Salt Lake City, the only population centers of over 100,000 in the Northern Rocky Mountains. However, because 89.3% of the county's population resides in or near the county seat of Casper, Casper is considered by the U.S. Census bureau to be an urbanized area.

First, the Good News

The citizens of Natrona County have long demonstrated a commitment to their community. There are a number of small and medium-sized museums, including an art museum, a hands-on children's science center, a paleontology museum, an historical museum at Fort Caspar, and the newly opened National Trails Center. Casper also has a small but excellent symphony orchestra.

Education in Natrona County is valued and well supported financially. Residents may attend the University of Wyoming-Casper College Center or Casper College itself, a strong two-year community college. Eighty-eight percent of the county's population has a high school diploma, twenty percent a bachelor's degree or higher.

At the statewide level, there have been impressive efforts to keep Wyoming communities on the cutting edge of the digital age. The State continues to fund the Wyoming Equality Network, an interactive video system that links all of the high schools, community colleges, and the University of Wyoming with an interactive video system that they may use at no charge. Further, every school in Wyoming has Internet connectivity.

In the social services area, there are numerous consortia working together for programs to help the state's residents. An example is the 21st Century Prevention Coalition, a recent collaborative effort in Natrona County funded to prevent substance abuse in the community with monies from the Wyoming Youth Development Collaborative, the Wyoming Department of Health, the Wyoming Department of Education, the Governor's Advisory Board on Substance Abuse and Violent Crime and the U.S. Department of Education.

Then, the Challenges

Transportation: As in many rural areas of the United States, transportation in central Wyoming poses a significant problem for the economic future of the area as well as for the general lifestyle of those at or near the poverty level. Transportation within Natrona County is a serious problem for those who cannot afford an automobile. While the City of Casper is attempting to find funding for an expanded system of transportation, all that exists is a small fleet of vans for which people can make a reservation.

Costs of using this limited system are prohibitive for many citizens. There is no transportation available among the communities of the county, so those who live in Powder River or Midwest, for example, have no options at all if they do not own a car. Transportation between the communities of Natrona County and the "outside world" is limited as well. Although there is a bus system that connects to out-of-state carriers, there is no passenger service by rail. And, despite efforts by the State to subsidize air transportation, it has been consistently downgraded over the past ten years. There remain five small commuter flights each way between Casper and Denver per day, four to Salt Lake City, and three to Billings, Montana.

Economic and Social Challenges: Once an affluent center of the mineral-extraction industries (oil, gas, coal and uranium), Casper has suffered from an on-going economic boom-and-bust cycle. In the mid-1970s a boom brought a population influx to the county that continued until 1981, when the American petroleum industry experienced severe economic stress. As the large oil companies began moving out of Casper and Wyoming, Casper lost population at an alarming rate. Although now growing at a slow but steady rate, Natrona County is still below its high of 71,856 inhabitants reached in 1980.

Perhaps more importantly than simply a loss of population, the oil companies also took with them many of the high paying jobs that had characterized the economy, leaving a work force that earns almost 13% below the national average. (U.S. median family income: \$41,994; Natrona County median family income: \$36,619).

Not unlike many communities in the nation, Natrona County continues to struggle to diversify its economy and establish a job market that can provide good jobs for its people. The majority of the jobs in the county are in the service, retail, and construction industries - the first two of which tend to be low paying, the third of which tends to be seasonal. The result is that many Casper residents are underemployed, necessitating two income earners in most families and parents who must hold several jobs in many.

While the Census Bureau reports the poverty rate for families with children under 18 to be close to the national average of 12%, the records of the Natrona County School District show that 32% of K-12 children qualify for free or reduced lunches, an indicator that families with children tend to be poorer than the general population. Twelve of the District's 26 elementary schools are school-wide Title I schools, with poverty levels ranging from 50 to 91%.

Again like many communities, especially in rural areas of the country, the population of Natrona County is aging dramatically. The 1980 Census reported that 35% of the population was over 35. By 2000, that statistic had soared to 65%. This change reflects both the general aging of the population and the inability of the economy to create jobs for young people, who are increasingly leaving Natrona County and Wyoming for larger job markets.

Other social problems, many attributable to economic pressures, contribute to the stress on individuals and families and the resulting demand for social services. Natrona County has consistently demonstrated a pattern of family violence, sexual abuse, teen pregnancy, and teen suicide rates well above the national average. One of every three babies born in Casper is born to an unmarried mother, with 15.9% born to teenagers. Substance abuse is high, especially in the

use of methamphetamine or crank, which young people use at more than twice the rate of their urban peers.

While statistics on violent crime in Natrona County are similar to those in large urban areas, crimes against property are consistently above national averages, which Casper police attribute in large part to young drug abusers resorting to theft to support their addictions.

Social Services in Natrona County As in many rural areas of the nation, the demand for social services in Casper and surrounding communities continues to grow as the population ages and increasing numbers of families, especially those with young children, struggle economically. In Natrona County, there is an impressive commitment among service providers to provide the best services possible to those in need. Nevertheless, they face numerous challenges in doing so.

(1) Most are very small organizations staffed by volunteers or, in some cases, a small, part-time staff; (2) Most have very limited resources and rely on soft money to continue to operate; (3) All suffer from the fact that there are no large corporations and only a handful of foundations that grant money in Natrona County, making grant money extremely difficult to secure; and (4) The resources and personnel of most are too limited to be able to access the funding, networks and systems available to large non-profits and government-funded entities.

Yet, in rural communities like Natrona County, the small and medium-sized non-profit organizations are often critical to complete the spectrum of services needed by individuals and families who are struggling.

An example is the Alzheimer's Affiliation of Wyoming, which has one part-time employee, yet serves a very important role for families whose loved ones have been diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Providing them with a computer and software, then training core volunteers to take advantage of technology to share information with other providers and helping them learn to use information to provide better services to more people who need them would transform that small group, making them a much more viable service provider within the community.

How The Path Finder Consortium Proposes to Address These Challenges

The service providers in this consortium propose the following activities:

(1) Computer stations will be placed in the public areas of all Consortium members and linked to the Internet and a central Consortium website; (2) Computer stations will be piloted and evaluated in easily accessible, 24-hour locations in the community, beginning with the Wyoming Medical Center and phasing in at WalMart and/or another location identified as easily accessible by end users; (3) On the central web site for those seeking services Consortium organizations will provide information about all services available as well as a common preliminary application asking clients for basic demographic and contact information, with further instructions on how to complete the application process or, in the case of service providers unable to participate in the preliminary application process, contact information with instructions on how to apply for services; (4) In a collaboration with the 21st Century Coalition mentioned earlier and the Wyoming Statistical Analysis Center at the University of Wyoming in Laramie

(WYSAC), the MDS software that has been modified for service providers in the 21st Century Coalition will be adapted for use by service providers in the Path Finder Coalition, allowing them to gather and share data on programs and services; (5) Primarily using existing video conferencing technology between Laramie and Casper, WYSAC will work with Casper College and consortium members in the first year of the grant to train staff to use the MDS software in a process-data gathering system as well as to help them integrate the software with other databases and software required for their individual programs and services; in year two to expand their staffs' ability to use process-level data in an online reporting system to plan for positive movement toward their goals; and in year three to use data collected to do outcome-based evaluations of their programs and services; (6) The web site and software will be customized by WYSAC to provide easy access to information about services available for both clients and service providers, assure all necessary security of information, allow for sharing of information among consortium members, and support data gathering and analysis; (7) A contract purchasing half or more of the time of an IT person will be initiated with the Natrona County School District to assure that Consortium members have on-going technical support that is quickly accessible yet affordable for the period beyond the grant itself; (8) Consortium members that already have a website will receive technical training and support from the IT person to improve those sites and link them to the Consortium web site; (9) Consortium members that neither have nor wish a website will be provided space on the Consortium website; and (10) A training program beginning with initial training and providing on-going, just-in-time training will be offered consortium service providers in collaboration with the 21st Century Coalition, WYSAC, the Casper Star-Tribune's Trib.com technical staff, and the Casper College ACT Center.

Much of the training and support will utilize the state's interactive video system to link Natrona County communities with the University of Wyoming and WYSAC in Laramie.

II. INNOVATION

This project is innovative in its organizational partnerships, a network of collaboration that will leverage scarce human and material resources throughout the social service providers in Natrona County. For example, the involvement of the Wyoming Statistical Analysis Center at the University of Wyoming with non-profit organizations of all sizes will expand the organizational capacity of the non-profit community in Natrona County to gather and use data in the design, evaluation, and modification of services provided. This capacity will greatly improve the sustainability of the project past the grant period itself.

The project is also unique in its value as a demonstration project for rural communities around the nation, addressing many challenges that are common to small communities. On one hand, it proposes the use of an existing interactive video conferencing system, a sophisticated and expensive technology, to link the trainers and statisticians, who are based 150 miles away in Laramie, with service providers in Casper. This distance delivery of support and training demonstrates a very practical use of digital technology to improve access in rural areas to technical expertise that is rarely found in small, geographically isolated communities.

On the other hand, the project also proposes a relatively uncomplicated web-based model that is accessible and affordable for small communities anywhere. Because this project will use

web-based software for the gathering and sharing of information, it can be used on any platform, requiring only Internet access to make it realistic and affordable for rural communities.

The Steering Committee, which spent over a year planning this proposal, investigated a number of TOP projects before completing the project design. Committee members talked with the Project Director of the Plugged In Project in East Palo Alto, California, and found that, although that project involves many of the components herein proposed, it stopped short of two-way communication with end users of services. The Lee County Board of County Commissioners' project in Fort Myers, Florida developed a data base of social services that is easily updateable, but did not target the development of organizational capacity among non-profits that we believe essential to improve services and provide benefits to the community long past the life of a three-year grant. The Pathways Project in Atlanta, which was funded by both public and private monies, had many of the same goals as this project, but was much too expensive for a small community, with a cost of \$900,000 for startup and annual expenses of \$225,000 to run the system. The project that seemed the most applicable to Wyoming of all the projects investigated was the One Stop Career Network of the Boulder Community Network in Colorado. While it was a fine demonstration of many of the activities we propose, we did not see evidence that the BCN made an effort to extend existing networks and systems to small and medium-sized service providers, building their organizational capacity to gather and use information intelligently using technology. Nevertheless, we learned much from the design of the Boulder project.

III. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

In January 2002, the United Way of Natrona County launched an initiative to help its Board evaluate, support, and improve current projects as well as anticipate and plan for future funding needs and priorities. A local consultant was asked to lead a community-wide analysis of the needs of service providers and of the citizens they serve. The process was directed by a steering committee of representatives of non-profit organizations and the United Way Board. It also included a representative of the end users, a very committed woman who, after using a wide variety of social services, now works with battered women and children at a local shelter.

The process began with a series of focus groups. The first two focus groups invited those receiving services from a wide variety of organizations to discuss the services they had used in Natrona County, the ease of access they perceived to those services, and other concerns and issues they might identify. The input from those focus groups was then turned into a survey that asked others receiving services to agree or disagree on a four point Likert scale. The surveys were distributed throughout the community. Eighty-one receivers of services from all sizes and types of providers filled out and returned the survey.

The second two focus groups invited all social service providers in the County to discuss the challenges they face in developing and providing services for those in need. One focus group involved small service providers, generally defined as having fewer than two staff members, the second larger service providers, or those with more than two staff members. Again, the input from those sessions became a survey that was distributed to every social service provider in Natrona County. Twenty-eight organizations returned that survey.

The results of both surveys and consequent goal setting for the Path Finder Project are found in the Appendices of this proposal. The Consortium believes that the outcomes that resulted from this four-month community goal setting process have great promise to address the challenges and needs of the citizens of the county.

Outcomes or Goals for the project: (1) Those in need in Natrona County will be able to use technology to more easily obtain information about and access to the full range of services for which they are eligible; (2) Consortium non-profits will use technology to leverage scarce resources and provide better service to clients; (3) Consortium non-profits will develop organizational capacity to gather, analyze and use information for planning and improvement of services through technology; and (4) Consortium non-profits will benefit in improved services and reduced costs from the use of technology to share information with fellow organizations.

Partnerships:

Collaboration with the 21st Century Coalition will allow the Path Finder Consortium to access the software from that project for only the costs of modification. Further, there are eight organizations that are members of both consortia and are already learning to use the software, which will provide mentor organizations within the Path Finder Consortium.

The Wyoming Statistical Analysis Center of the University of Wyoming will serve this consortium in a number of capacities. They will modify the MDS software to meet the needs of member service providers. They will further serve as the web-site development consultant, assuring that the web sites are fully conversant with the software and its capabilities. Rodney Wambeam, a WYSAC researcher and Principal Investigator for the 21st Century Coalition, will serve as the Principal Investigator/Evaluator for the Path Finder Project. He has been involved in the planning of this project and is well prepared to serve as its evaluator. The WYSAC staff will be accessible to consortium members generally over the interactive video system, but will make trips to Casper when face-to-face consultation is needed.

The Casper College ACT Center will collaborate with WYSAC and other partners to provide training for the consortium service providers.

The Casper Star-Tribune, whose Internet provider Trib.com will be used by consortium members, will provide free Internet access to service providers. The Star-Tribune will also provide expertise in the design of and publicity for the twenty-four-hour computer stations to be placed in the community. The IT's of Trib.com will also help in the design and implementation of training and technical support.

The Natrona County School District and the City of Casper will work with the consortium to link all schools and city buildings to the web site and encourage employees to help potential end users learn of the web site and how to use it to access services. They will provide computer stations that the public may use to access the web site.

The organizations of the consortium will participate in all activities of the project, including staff training and consultation with the other organizations, the Project Director, and the Principal

Investigator. They have also committed to respond to all requests for information from organizations considering implementing this model, helping disseminate project results.

Support for End Users

The training for the staffs of the Consortium service providers will be offered by a combination of WYSAC experts, the Casper College ACT Center, the IT person hired, and the Project Director. It will be offered on an on-going, just-in-time basis, using the interactive video system where needed to link the University of Wyoming personnel to Casper. Training in how to access and use the web site will be provided for school district, library, Casper College, City of Casper and other personnel who need that training by the Casper College ACT Center and by the IT person on an on-going basis.

The training for clients to enable them to be able to use the web site to access information about services and make preliminary application where applicable will be accomplished by the service providers and others who are near the computer stations. The IT person hired will be responsible for developing easy-to-understand and easy-to-follow directions to be placed at the two computer stations that will be placed out in the community. Since this is a pilot component of the project, the success of those stations will be evaluated and adjustments made as necessary to assure that they are user friendly, yet protected from vandalism and theft. The Casper Star-Tribune will provide expertise and publicity for this effort.

IV. EVALUATION AND DISSEMINATION

Outcomes and Evaluation Questions

Outcome 1: Those in need will be able to use technology to more easily obtain information about and access to the full range of services for which they are eligible.

Indicator: Increasing numbers of clients applying for services will report easier access to information about services and the ability to apply more easily through the use of technology.

- What percent of clients report that they are using the web site to learn about services? - What percent of clients using the web-based system report good access to information about how to apply for services from consortium providers? - What percent of clients using the web-based system are making preliminary application for services on line?

Outcome 2: Consortium non-profits will use technology to leverage scarce resources and provide better services to clients.

Indicator: Consortium members will leverage scarce resources and become more efficient through participation in the Path Finder Consortium.

- What percent of consortium members report that participation in the consortium and its use of technology has helped them leverage staff time to improve services? - What percent of consortium members report that participation in the consortium and its use of technology has

allowed them to reduce costs? - What percent of consortium members report that participation in the consortium and its use of technology has allowed them to reach a larger number of potential clients? - What percent of consortium members report that having a web site or space on a web site has allowed them to improve the quality and efficiency of their services? - What percent of consortium members report having access to high quality, timely training for staff members? - What percent of consortium members report having access to the technical support necessary to maintain and improve the quality and efficiency of the services they offer?

Outcome 3: The consortium will use technology to develop organizational capacity in service providers to gather, analyze, and use information for planning and the improvement of services

Indicator: Consortium members will demonstrate the organizational capacity to gather, analyze, and use data to improve services.

- What percent of staff members and trained volunteers within the consortium can use the hardware and software to gather, analyze, and use data? - What percent of consortium service providers report that participation in the Path Finder Consortium has improved their organizational capacity to gather, analyze, share, and use information to accomplish the purposes of their organization?

Outcome 4: Consortium non-profits will benefit in improved services and reduced costs through the use of technology to share information with fellow organizations.

- What percent of consortium members report that collaboration and sharing of information that meets the organization's confidentiality requirements has helped them leverage staff time to improve services? - What percent of consortium members report that collaboration and sharing of information that meets the organization's confidentiality requirements has helped them leverage staff time and resources to reduce costs?

Dr. Rodney Wambeam of the Wyoming Statistical Analysis Center will serve as the Principal Investigator/Evaluator of the project. Please see the Evaluation Plan in the Appendix for specific data collection methods and reporting.

Dissemination

There are a number of elements in this project that will make it attractive for other communities, especially small communities in rural areas. In order to assure that information about what is learned in this project is available to those communities around the nation, United Way of Natrona County will both publish information about the project on its national website and make a presentations on what is learned in the project at the national convention. Matching money is budgeted for that purpose. Partner organizations will be encouraged to do the same in their respective state, regional and national organizations.

The consortium will prepare brochures for and do a presentation at Wyoming Philanthropy Days in the summer of 2004 on the results of the project.

The consortium is also prepared to serve as a demonstration site and to share with inquiring communities and organizations nationally what is learned in the project.

V. PROJECT FEASIBILITY

Technical Approach

This project is designed to support universal access to a web-based system, a design that will accommodate any platform and requires only a modem and Internet connection. This universal access is critical for rural communities and the model is easily replicable and expandable. Because the server will be housed at the Wyoming Statistical Analysis Center in Laramie and shared with the organizations in the 21st Century Coalition, United Way will not have to purchase or maintain a server. The training model is well designed and supported by a group of experts in technology and evaluation who are accustomed to working with the general public. They will be reinforced by local IT personnel from Trib.com and Casper College in supporting the non-profits and building their capacity to use technology to access and use information well. Further, the use of the State's interactive video network at no cost will allow expertise at the University of Wyoming in Laramie to be easily accessed in Casper. And, because the consortium will be networked with the K-12 schools, libraries and the City of Casper, there will be multiple partners who will contribute their expertise and on-going support.

Implementation Schedule

Please see the Appendices for a full implementation timeline and organizational chart.

Sustainability

From the beginning of this project, the McMurry Foundation and the Casper Area Community Foundation have been keen observers of the process. This intense interest in the project, coupled with both foundations' stated purpose to support social services in Natrona County, gives promise that, while they do not have sufficient funds to initiate this project, they are interested in sustaining it once it has been implemented. The participation of key partners such as the City, the school district, the local newspaper, Casper College, and the University of Wyoming also bodes well for the sustainability of this project.