



# Pottawattamie County Community Services

*Suzanne Watson, Director*

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August 28, 2008

Iowa State Association of Counties  
ATTN: Robin Harlow  
501 SW 7<sup>th</sup> St, Suite Q  
Des Moines, IA 50309

Dear Mr. Harlow,

Please accept the enclosed application of CountyConnection.org, for consideration for the 2008 Excellence in Action Award, County-inter-office division. County Connection.org is an exemplary example of departmental collaboration to better serve the residents of our County. It is a web based program that makes current, on-line information about health and human services available to the residents of Pottawattamie County.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Suzanne M. Watson".

Suzanne Watson, LMSW  
Director  
CPC Administrator

*Central Point of Coordination (CPC) • General Assistance • Mental Health Social Work • Targeted Case Management*

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## CountyConnection.org

**1. Abstract**

In the Fall of 2007 the Pottawattamie County Community Services Department and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) Department met with the Transition Advisory Council (TAC), a council of local human service professionals and educators to begin an initiative to identify and map human services in Pottawattamie County. CountyConnection.org was launched on June 1, 2008. Its purpose is to make current, on-line information about health and human services available to the residents of Pottawattamie County. CountyConnection.org is a map based resource (powered by Google) that allows persons to search services by category or by name. The search then displays the results on a map along with contact information for that agency and a brief description of the service. Users can type in an address to identify where they are in relation to the service they are seeking and can choose to display the city bus routes. The map has the typical options: zoom in/out, pan, satellite photography, and overview map. The map and agency information is printer friendly. There is a link to an all-inclusive spreadsheet of the mapped information on the site as well as listing of services that are not “map-able”. This downloadable information is available in Microsoft Excel format. Any agency that wants to be included on the site can submit, remove or update their information by clicking the “update/submit” button. The site utilizes Survey Monkey.com allowing users to provide feedback regarding the usefulness of the site allowing the TAC to determine any needed changes.

**2. The problem/need for the program**

The lack of a centralized location to access the information hindered the referral process to appropriate agencies which resulted in individuals contacting and making trips to multiple service providers before finding a solution to their need. As a result of feedback from community members, community service providers, and educators in the County, it was determined that there was no efficient way to identify the health and human service resources available to residents in the County. The lack of a centralized location to access community services was also a gap identified by the Community Service Planning Council, consisting of mental health and developmental disability providers, parents, and consumers. Developing a plan to better assist residents of the County to identify resources became a primary goal of the 2007 Pottawattamie County Community Services Management Plan. As a member of the TAC, Pottawattamie County joined efforts to address the need and to take the lead role in facilitating the development of the CountyConnection.org program.

Community Resource Guides did exist but were often tailored to specific agencies and proved to be expensive to print and were quickly out-dated. None of the resource guides were all-inclusive and many areas overlapped. Due to the individualized needs of individuals and families, an all-inclusive guide seemed appropriate. Attempts at electronically mapping resources had been made in the past but barriers included funding for the technical expertise and on-going costs of updating a site. There is a national, phone based, human service and volunteer resource and referral system available in our area, but the information is not always specific to Pottawattamie County and it lacks the visual mapping and print capability as well as the ability to update quickly and frequently.

### **3. Description of program**

In the Fall of 2007 GIS initiated discussion with the Community Services Department to determine if they could be of service. Through further conversation it was apparent that GIS could be instrumental in accomplishing the resource mapping program. GIS was excited about the new opportunity to provide support to a human service program. GIS accompanied the Community Services Department to a TAC meeting to present their ideas. The TAC, consisting of members from Iowa Workforce Development, Area Education Agency, Crossroads of Western Iowa and VODEC (residential and sheltered work providers), Department of Human Services, Iowa Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Council Bluffs Community Schools, and Pottawattamie County Community Services, decided that the task fit well within their mission to transition youth and assist them to connect with services in our community. In partnership with Pottawattamie County GIS, a sub-committee was formed and began designing the CountyConnection.org website. These inter-departmental and inter-agency partnerships made the program possible.

The objective of the program was to develop a readily available and up-to-date listing of the health and human service resources available to residents living in Pottawattamie County, as well as to maintain a central location of information. An added benefit was providing a tool that was also readily available to health and human service agencies who could then utilize the information to refer residents to other needed services. One of the barriers to accessing services included transportation. Although CountyConnection.org does not resolve the transportation issues in the County it does allow users to see a departure point as well as where the desired service is located and then determine which transportation source will be most effective for them. The mapping of community resources from government to the informal community supports is essential in determining current needs as well as future planning.

CountyConnection.org is a map based resource (powered by Google) that allows persons to search services by category or by name. The search then displays the results on a map along with contact information for that agency and a brief description of the service. Users can also type in an address to identify where they are in relation to the service they are seeking and can choose to display the city bus routes. The map has the typical options: zoom in/out, pan, satellite photography, and overview map. The map and agency information is printer friendly. There is a link to an all-inclusive spreadsheet of the mapped information on the site as well as listing of services that are not "map-able", for example, hotlines. This downloadable information is available in Microsoft Excel format. Any agency that wants to be included on the site can submit, remove or update their information by clicking the "update/submit" button. The site utilizes Survey Monkey.com allowing users to provide feedback regarding the usefulness of the site allowing the TAC to determine any needed changes.

As a member of the TAC, Pottawattamie County Community Services responded to the County GIS department's positive response to the program and served as the lead on the subcommittee of TAC in developing the program. Committee members met monthly to review progress and program needs as well as to divide the responsibility for obtaining and confirming the accuracy of the resource information. The data was then merged into an Excel spreadsheet and submitted to GIS for implementation to a web program. The committee met several times to view the program and determine if the site was meeting the program objective and jointly developed a process for promoting the site including live demonstrations at inter-agency meetings, creating flyers, contacting the local newspapers and mailings.

#### 4. *Use of technology*

Once it was decided that GIS was going forward with the program they began researching the best technology to use to display the mapped resources. Initially the GIS Department offered three different options. The first option was an Adobe PDF file that included a map with services on one page and the list of services on the following pages. A user would then be required to flip back and forth between the two pages to find the service(s) they were looking for. The second option was a traditional web site that would allow a user to click on a service name to see the pertinent information along with a link to a map. The third option was to develop a Google map mashup with the services mapped. It was an easy decision for the TAC – they liked the Google map mashup.

This was a new technology to the GIS Department in regards to developing an in-house Google mapping site. Challenges included getting the mapped services from the GIS software to the online map, matching service icons on the map to the services in the list, customizing the user interface to look appealing and logical, printability, and fitting the site to a 600x800 resolution screen. Each challenge was tackled one at a time and offered learning opportunities.

To accurately communicate the technology it is easier described in linear terms. In other words the process to get the services on the map is the best way to explain the use of the technology. The Community Services Department currently maintains the master list of services in Microsoft Excel. This spreadsheet includes the service name, address, email, phone, description, website, category, and last updated date for each service listed. When a respectable amount of updates have been made to the spreadsheet it is emailed to the GIS Department. GIS then geocodes those addresses to the map (moving some by hand where multiple services exist in one location) and are saved in a shapefile. That shapefile is then converted to an xml file which is what is necessary for Google Maps. The xml file contains all the information found in the Excel file along with map coordinates and an assigned code for its icon. The web site and the data (xml file) are stored on a web server. The site was developed using Microsoft Visual Studio using ASP.NET and JavaScript and served via Microsoft Internet Information Services (IIS).

Simplicity, logic, and ease-of-use were all words that GIS took to heart in designing the layout of the web site. It was imperative that the site be very simple and require little to no training to use. For example, early on the team decided it would use no more than sixteen categories for organizing the services. This allowed for an easier design with an even number of categories and it makes it easier for the user than if there were 20 or 25 categories. The icons used were created using Adobe Photoshop and then were uploaded to Google. The icon set includes 8 colors and 2 shapes ranging from letters A to Z. This gives a possibility of 416 services (8 x 2 x 26). The combination of icons and letters allow users to identify services when information is printed in black and white form.

Another technical aspect of the site is the ability to turn on/off bus routes. The bus route data was procured from the regional planning agency, Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA). The GIS Department took the routes and simplified them to help with drawing speed then exported the lines to an xml file.

Users can also submit, update, or remove services from the site. It was important to the group that we have the ability to maintain the site as easily as possible. It was determined that the best way to do so is to have the user community help us. By clicking the Update/Submit button a user can communicate any additions or changes to a service. Doing so sends an email to the TAC subcommittee chair person. Their Outlook account has a rule that sends all emails from the site to a folder for further review at their next TAC subcommittee meeting which starts the whole process over again.

### **5. Cost of program**

The financial costs for CountyConnection.org are minimal. The domain name of CountyConnection.org is \$15 per year which was funded via the Pottawattamie County Information Technology (IT) Department. Other costs for the program included printing 200 color copies of screen shots of the site which were used for advertising. GIS provided the color copies. The Community Services Department paid for the envelope and postage costs to mail flyers to community members. Community Outreach is a focus of both the Community Services and the GIS Departments, therefore the cost of staff participation in the program was viewed as a sunk cost. The time it takes to process the information for updates depends on the amount of submissions and changes requested each week. The GIS Department spent approximately three months developing the site. Every time there is an update to the services on the site it takes the GIS Department about three hours to complete.

### **6. Results/success of program**

The program was officially launched on June 1, 2008. Success of the website is measured by Google Analytics, Survey Monkey, and user testimony. Since the site was launched there have been just over 1,000 visits and 3,300 pageviews. A visit represents the number of individual sessions initiated by all the visitors and a page view is defined as a single view of any page on your site. In essence each visitor to this site views an average of 3.3 pages. The users of the site spend an average of two minutes and sixteen seconds per visit. With acceptance of the site we are seeing our numbers increase over time. In other words, August's numbers are better than July's, and July was better than June. The use of Survey Monkey allows us to ask users of the site specific questions and get their responses. Most of the responses are positive, but some of the responses have led to changes to the site. Truthfully, the constructive criticism is preferred because it allows us to think about the site in the way that user did. It helps us realize that even the most obvious aspects to us are not always so for others.

The positive results of the program are also apparent from the amount of data updated to the site each month. On average additions of 10 or more services per month and 20 or more updates to existing services per month have been made. An employee from an agency located across the state was recently referred to the site as she assisted her client to find housing and financial assistance enabling him to move back to Pottawattamie County to be near his family. She was able to identify the resource information she needed as well as print out a map and all of the contact information simply by using CountyConnection.org. Another human service professional received a phone call from a man whose daughter suffered a brain injury. Although this was not his area of expertise the human service professional was able to pull up the site and direct the man to the service he needed. Soon after the site was launched we found that someone blogged about the site. The blog was from a source who often talks about health and human services and the use of GIS technology.

## ***7. Worthiness of an Award***

CountyConnection.org is an innovative program demonstrating an outstanding example of departments within County government as well as community agencies collaborating to provide a needed service for the residents of Pottawattamie County. The program provides a cost and time savings to agencies and users by eliminating the need for printed resource guides with outdated information. Individual users and service providers can now directly contact the service they need. The program can be sustained without additional dollars (only work hours) as the responsibilities for governing and updating the information are shared among TAC members and not solely on any one agency.

Tracking usage in Google Analytics has allowed us to drill down to individual usage per category. We can see which categories are being used the most and the least. This revolutionizes the way we think about people and their needs. We actually have a defined metric to track the needs of our community.

While the Community Services Department previously tried to fill the gap of providing resources to community members through a printed resource guide, this program has filled the gap in a much more efficient and cost effective manner. It has also utilized today's technology and mainstream methods of accessing information. People look for information on the web. It has promoted inter-governmental and overall community cooperation and coordination in addressing the problem of lack of a central location of health and human service information. The program has not only promoted general governmental accountability, but has demonstrated County governmental leaderships throughout the entire health and human services community in Pottawattamie County.