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To: Pathfinders RC&D

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SUMMARY

Pathfinders asked us to compile an accessible digital resource guide to aid residents with finding help related to housing, education, and job retention. Iowa is among the top 15 states experiencing a high gap between educated “stayers and leavers.”ⁱ It is our goal to shrink this gap by connecting rural Iowans—particularly those in Pathfinders’ six-county area—with the services they need to succeed.

BACKGROUND

Rural communities currently face two large barriers related to resources and services: 1) resources are too spread out geographically; and 2) there is a lack of available services. Picking one county out of the six within Pathfinders RC&D’s core service area highlights the prevalence of these two obstacles. Jefferson County has six main cities: Packwood, Batavia, Lockridge, Libertyville, Maharishi Vedic City, and Fairfield.ⁱⁱ The last three are the only cities in this county that feature any organizations with resource programs in the surrounding five-mile area.ⁱⁱⁱ Individuals in the rest of the county must travel farther to access these types of resources. In addition, often the lists of available resources only exist on paper, requiring residents to know where to look. Pathfinders RC&D, for example, keeps a paper-filled binder that requires a person to come into their brick-and-mortar location to access it.

Resource guides of this type have a long history in the Midwest. In the first half of the 20th century universities and agricultural extension services created resource guides that provided information to support farmers and their rural communities. These resource guides incorporated a wide variance of topics, from local Midwestern history to pragmatic skills. Traditional resource guides included lists of recommended articles and other materials that librarians and subject experts compiled. These were then printed and distributed to users. The rise of public libraries in this same era made it easier to disseminate the guides.^{iv}

Another important factor for the evolution of Midwestern resource guides came about with the popularization of community organizations. Historical societies, non-governmental organizations, and non-profit organizations were all able to create resource guides for the intent of preserving their local Midwestern heritage while simultaneously disseminating valuable information to rural residents. An early example occurred in 1857, when the Iowa State Legislature created the State Historical Society of Iowa in Iowa City.^v A more recent example occurred in 1964 with the establishment of Iowa Community Action Association (ICAA), a non-profit organization founded as a direct result of the Economic

Opportunity Act of 1964.^{vi} Over time, their resource guides expanded to include information about community resources, cultural resources, and local history.

Today, resource guides have the power to help Iowans affected by poverty. While poverty in our state is currently low, it is critical that people are made aware of the resources available to them to prevent the poverty rate from climbing back up.^{vii} Considering that Pathfinders' six-county area has suffered heavily from poverty relative to other parts of these, these resources are even more critical.

Additionally, Iowa has for several years been losing much of its young population to “brain drain.” Iowa youth might be compelled to stay if they were made better aware of the amenities available to them.^{viii} Additionally, keeping young professionals in the area could help boost the number of available services, which cannot function without motivated and trained staff.

CURRENT EFFORTS

Pathfinders maintains a binder with an array of resources from across their core six-county service area. These resources include information about legal support, housing support, and employment assistance. There are more than 300 pages in the binder, representing an array of agencies and service providers. Information about some of these resources also exists on Pathfinders' website, which features a resource guide for Jefferson County, Iowa. The other five counties have their own guides, which utilize both local and national resources.

- Mahaska County has two websites—a directory that lists multiple service categories, e.g., offices, churches, abuse and violence prevention,^{ix} and one providing information about the Mahaska County Community Services Building.^x
- Wapello County has a website with emergency management links, resources, and videos.^{xi}
- Davis County has a resource directory and website that provides access to people who can help navigate the directory and information about its official government building.^{xii} The Davis County directory lists the websites and phone numbers of over 50 different resources. It was last updated July 14th, 2022.^{xiii}
- Keokuk County has a website listing several categories of resources, ranging from transportation services to advocacy and legal assistance.^{xiv} This collection of resources is listed in alphabetical order and, like the Davis County guide, is easy to read.
- Van Buren County has a community service directory, but it provides very little information compared to the other counties. However, the Van Buren service directory does list current events, unlike the other guides.^{xv}

In addition to the resource materials provided by Pathfinders and each of the six counties, the website 211.org's Nebraska, Iowa, Illinois chapter (<https://uwm211.org>) has a detailed list of resources specific to each county in Iowa.^{xvi} Since searching 211 is not as straightforward as it seems—it can be difficult to

discern federal from local resources, for instance—having assistance from someone familiar with the site is helpful when attempting to use it.

BEST PRACTICES

1. Explicitly describing a resource guide's intended audience

- The website of Ingersoll Gender Center in Seattle, WA, features a [guide](#) for transgender and gender-nonconforming people in nearby Snohomish County. At the beginning of the guide, right after its table of contents, there's an introduction that spells out its intended audience.^{xvii}
- The Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) hosts a [resource guide](#) on its website specifically for disabled Oklahomans. The short introduction to this guide classifies it as “a collection of information for individuals with disabilities.”^{xviii}

2. Using visual elements to increase access

By reducing the amount of text on a single page, these icons improve readability and make guides more accessible to those with limited English skills. In addition, allowing users of a digital guide to see all the resources that offer a certain service by clicking an icon is beneficial.

- The USDA's website hosts a [summary](#) of their Rural Development mission area's various programs, which are designed to support rural families and farmers. The summary is split into seven different sections, each marked with its own unique icon.^{xix}
- The Snohomish County guide also features visual icons, which indicate the types of services offered by each program or resource.

3. Including leisure and recreational resources

One way to address the challenge of brain drain is to provide residents with opportunities for leisure and recreation.^{xx}

- The Snohomish County guide includes plenty of resources for community building and social interaction among its target demographics.
- The Oklahoma DRS guide includes a chapter on sports, recreation, and travel opportunities for disabled Oklahomans.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Compile best practices

Pathfinders should maintain a guide that lists the resources available to individuals living within their core service area. Not only that, but this guide should combine the most important, relevant information from various South-Central Iowa guides into one centralized, easily accessible guide using a variety of features which we have determined to be best practices of resource guide design. It should be available as both a searchable online database and a printable PDF. To

improve readability, each version should use visual icons to indicate the types of services offered by different resources.

The best practices that we identify will be laid out in Appendix A. They will contain notes and images that are collected from resource guides from around the country; Pathfinders should try to implement as many of these as they are able, and in doing so will guarantee that their guide is accessible, intuitive, and user-friendly.

2. *Implement appendix and best practices*

Following the instructions laid out in Appendix A, attempts should be made to implement features like:

- Icons to denote the categories that the resource may fall into
- Social interaction resources for community building
- Clear definitions of who the target audience is

These are features which have been selected from a wide variety of comparable resource guides on account of their user-friendly nature, as we strongly recommend Pathfinders to center the guide around intuitive and accessible features so that the widest range of people can benefit from its information.

3. *Integrate AI elements*

Pathfinders should explore ways in which Artificial Intelligence could automatically update and maintain its online resource guide, ensuring information remains relevant. This technical assistance would help Pathfinders address the capacity issues affecting it and other resource guide-creating South-Central Iowa organizations. Additionally, Pathfinders should explore the implementation of an AI chatbot to help users of their online resource guide more quickly locate the resources relevant to them. A guide on how to best approach this will be included in Appendix B.

We have gathered all the relevant resource data for the Pathfinders service area and moved it from websites and paper to a much more manageable spreadsheet. There are brief instructions on how to train an AI in Appendix B, and using the resource information that we have gathered, an AI can be trained to serve web users in a streamlined and efficient manner.

APPENDIX A – Examples of Best Practices

1. *Explicitly describing a resource guide's intended audience*

Pictured below is the introduction to the [Snohomish County resource guide](#). It describes the process of creating the guide, its intended audience, and its potential limitations. Including a similar section in the Pathfinders digital guide would help it land in the hands of those who most need it.

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

Greetings! This guide was put together through the efforts of Ingersoll Gender Center. We also relied on the support of community leaders throughout the process of building these guides.

This guide is meant for trans and/or gender non-conforming folks who are navigating resources in Snohomish County. We've built this guide through surveys, meetings, listening sessions, and community conversations. We recognize that many of the resources listed in this guide are not long term solutions. To the best of our ability, we have vetted them to ensure that they are familiar with the trans and gender non-conforming communities. Some of them are used to working with our communities, some have more work to do. We look forward to a world in which all trans and gender diverse folks are able to access resources without worrying about their safety and well-being. We also know that our communities are resilient. Trans and/or gender non-conforming communities have been here since people have been in what we now call Washington state, and we will continue to leverage these resources the best we can to live the lives we deserve to live.

We hope you find this guide useful, and that you may see bits of yourself in here. Support is here and available to help you in navigating these resources.

However, an introduction does not need to be as long as that one. Below is the introduction to the [Oklahoma DRS resource guide](#). In just a few sentences, it describes how the guide was created and who it is intended for. It also helpfully provides contact information for anyone with questions about the guide. This introduction not only provides a reader with crucial information about the guide but addresses capacity issues by soliciting corrections and updates about resources already on the list, as well as information about new ones not yet listed. Opening a guide to feedback in this way helps ensure that it remains relevant to the communities it serves.

Disability Resource Guide

Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services produces and maintains the Disability Resource Guide. It is a collection of information for individuals with disabilities to refer to at any time.

Communications Office
3535 N.W. 58th Street, Suite 500
Oklahoma City, OK 73112-4824
405-951-3400 Voice
800-845-8476 Voice
405-951-3529 Fax

To correct, update or add resource listings notify
Communications Office
Cathy Martin,
Toll Free: 800-845-8476 Voice
Telephone: 405-951-3478
CMartin@okdrs.gov

The Oklahoma Disability Resource Guide is dedicated to Jean H. Jones, its original author, whose comprehensive knowledge, writing talent and tireless dedication made the publication of this document possible. Ms. Jones continues to serve Oklahomans with disabilities as a Legislative Information Representative with DRS' divisions of Services for the Blind and Visually Impaired and Vocational Rehabilitation.

2. *Using visual elements to increase access*

For the sake of simplicity, the [USDA Rural Development program summary](#) splits its many offerings into seven distinct categories. Each category receives its own section, helpfully marked with a unique visual icon. You can view these icons below. Their inclusion in the summary helps a reader skimming through the document quickly and easily understand what types of programs they're reading about.

We have more than
70 programs to
support rural America.



Single Family Housing



Multifamily Housing



Community Programs



Energy and Electric
Programs



Telecommunications
Programs



Water and Environmental
Programs



Business and Cooperative
Programs

The Snohomish County guide uses visual icons in a slightly different way. It divides resources into 11 themed sections: "Crisis Support & Basic Needs," "Food Support & Food Access," "Healthcare," "Housing," "Disability Support & Services," "LGBTQ Specific," "Legal Support," "Community Spaces & Social Events," "Rural Resources," "Transportation," and "Colleges & Universities." Visual icons are not used to differentiate these sections from one another. Instead, they're used within each section to quickly indicate the types of services offered by each individual resource. The bottom of every page in the guide features a key to the specific icons used on that page. Below, you can see an example from the "Crisis Support & Basic Needs" section:


CRISIS SUPPORT & BASIC NEEDS

*LEGEND OF ICONS ON BOTTOM OF PAGE

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE SERVICES SNOHOMISH COUNTY

 <https://dvs-snoco.org>

 info@dvs-snoco.org

 (425) 258-4428


 3010 Grand Ave, Everett WA

Food, clothing, shelter, safety planning, case management, legal advocacy, support groups

YWCA SNOHOMISH COUNTY

 <https://www.ywcaworks.org>


 (206) 461-4888

 Multiple, call for specific location

Emergency shelter, permanent housing, DV advocacy & legal services, clothing for employment

DSHS - COMMUNITY SERVICES OFFICES- EVERETT

 <http://bit.ly/washingtondshs>

 (877) 501-2233

 840 N Broadway Ave Suite 200, Everett, WA

 M-F 8am - 5pm

DSHS benefits including EBT, financial assistance with ID documents, financial assistance with housing & basic needs

3. *Including leisure and recreational resources*

The Oklahoma DRS guide divides its resources into 15 themed chapters, one of which focuses on “Sports, Recreation and Travel.” Though this guide does not use visual icons to indicate the types of services offered by each resource, it divides each category of resources into sections and subsections to help readers more easily find what they’re looking for. The Sports, Recreation, and Travel chapter, for instance, is divided into two sections: “Travel” and “Sports, Camps, Recreation, and Leisure.” The latter is further divided into three subsections: “Camps for Youths with Disabilities,” Recreation and Leisure for People with Disabilities” and “Sports for People with Disabilities.” Below is an excerpt from the Recreation and Leisure for People with Disabilities subsection:

Jacque B Travels and Meeting Planners

Email: jacque_b_travels@att.net

Jacque B Travels LLC is a small Travel Agency that books vacation packages and events for individuals with disabilities, families, groups and corporate. She also books cars, planes and trains. She requires a \$25.00 service charge for bookings.

Jacque B Travels LLC
6212 Brookside Drive
Oklahoma City, OK 73132
See map: [Google Maps](#)

Voice: 405-740-2462

Fax: 405-720-9036

Mid-America Paralyzed Veterans of America (MPVA)

[Visit Mid-America Paralyzed Veterans of America \(MPVA\) Website](#)

The Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) is a nonprofit organization chartered by the United States Congress and dedicated to serving the needs of its members.

PVA is a leading advocate for: Quality healthcare, research and education addressing spinal cord injury and dysfunction, benefits, civil rights and opportunities that maximize the independence of our members.

Sponsors fishing tournaments and trapshoot events that are accessible to people with disabilities. A great source of information on other sports activities including bowling, softball, basketball, shooting sports, hunting, snow skiing, camping, pool and various outdoor sporting events. PVA's "Step Outside" program offers multiple sports and outdoors experiences. PVA also provides information on wheelchair accessible fishing and hunting facilities and publishes a calendar of sports/outdoor events.

The Mid-America PVA Chapter hosts Annual picnics, sporting events and other recreational activities for their members throughout the year. Go to the website and check out the calendar of events that are posted on a monthly basis, including information on fishing, hunting and skiing events; deer hunting for persons who are non-ambulatory and various fall hunting events.

6108 N.W. 63 St., Suite A
Oklahoma City, OK 73132-7526
See map: [Google Maps](#)

Voice: 405-721-7168

Toll Free: 800-321-5041

Fax: 405-721-1829

Though the Snohomish County guide features fewer leisure and recreational resources, it does devote a whole section to these opportunities. The entirety of the “Community Spaces & Social Events” chapter is pictured below. Featuring resources of this type in our guide could be a good low-cost strategy for preventing brain drain in the Pathfinders RC&D core service area.

COMMUNITY SPACES & SOCIAL EVENTS


SNOHOMO BINGO ✨

 <https://www.facebook.com/SnoHomo-Bingo-432753830093490/>

Community events and social gatherings

SNOHOMISH COUNTY PRIDE FOUNDATION ✨

 <https://www.facebook.com/SnohomishPride/>

 info.snohomishcountypride@gmail.com

Annual pride event for Snohomish County

SNOHOMISH COUNTY LGBTQ MEETUP GROUP ✨

 <https://www.meetup.com/Snohomish-LGBTQ>

Social events, community events, peer support

APPENDIX B – AI Website Integration Guide

AI is a revolutionary tool that can enable quick referencing of information and help reduce time spent on content management and time spent by users trying to access information that may be otherwise difficult and time consuming to access. In practice, once this is deployed, users will be able to type in a field requesting information that is pertinent to their specific situation, and the AI will deliver it. An additional benefit of AI implementation is that it will always be current, so long as the data that it is trained on is up to date, this means that the Resource Guide AI will last longer than a printed handout, as it can be updated piecemeal. Here are the steps that can be taken to integrate AI into a website:

1. You will need access to a license for competitive, trainable AI software; we recommend Copilot Studio.
2. Copilot Studio has simple guides released by Microsoft that explain how to manage what are referred to as “knowledge sources”, but the broad strokes of this step include:
 - a. Removing external sources that the AI may want to pull from, such as public websites, will prevent unwanted noise from outside sources that could dilute or distract from the information that you are wanting your users to receive.
 - b. Importing your own Knowledge sources, such as websites and documents that you wish the AI to pull from, will train the AI to respond within the parameters of your intended content (i.e. Resources and Guides that are tailored specifically for South Central Iowa Rural Communities).
3. The AI’s Responses can be moderated to provide answers which are either “more precise” or “more creative”; for the intentions of a resource guide AI, it would likely be optimal to have it set to generate “more precise” answers.
4. The AI can be instructed to respond to specific Keywords or provide prompt buttons that can guide the conversation in a predictable way.
5. Once again, referring to Microsoft’s guides for specific details will be helpful to iron out and demo the AI; once it is tested and proven to be satisfactory, incorporating it into the website will be the easy part:
 - a. Under Copilot Settings > Channels > Custom website, click Copy
 - b. Provide the copied text to a Web Developer, and they can use it to embed the AI onto a website. Choice of website building software should not impact the ability to embed the AI

The University of Iowa has a great example of Copilot studio being used (albeit in the very early stages) on their Tippie College of Business website. While it is still quite rough around the edges, it serves as a good proof of concept, available at the following link: <https://tippie.uiowa.edu>

The monthly cost of Copilot Studio is \$200 per 25,000 messages.

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- ⁱ Committee, U. S. J. E. (2019, April 24). *Losing our minds: Brain drain across the United States*. United States Joint Economic Committee. www.jec.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/republicans/2019/4/losing-our-minds-brain-drain-across-the-united-states
- ⁱⁱ “Jefferson County (19101).” *Jefferson County (19101) | Iowa Community Indicators Program*, www.icip.iastate.edu/maps/refmaps/places/19101. Accessed 5 Nov. 2024.
- ⁱⁱⁱ “Iowa - 54 Results.” *Search.Ne211.Org*, search.ne211.org/search?query=Iowa&query_label=Iowa&query_type=text&location=Fairfield%2C%2BIowa%2C%2BUnited%2BStates&coords=-91.96378%2C41.006638&distance=5. Accessed 5 Nov. 2024.
- ^{iv} Weaver, Abigail. “Establishing an Institution: The Public Library Movement in Iowa 1900 - 1920.” *Iowa Historical Review*, University of Iowa History Department, 11 May 2017, pubs.lib.uiowa.edu/iowa-historical
- ^v “About.” State Historical Society, INC., <https://www.statehistoricalsocietyinc.com/about>. Accessed 6 Oct. 2024,
- ^{vi} “About ICAA.” Iowa Community Action Association, 4 Jan. 2023, iowacommunityaction.org/about/#:~:text=The%20Community%20Action%20movement%20was.
- ^{vii} Peters, David. *Rural Iowa at a Glance, 2024 Edition: Population Trends*. Iowa State University, Nov. 2024, smalltowns.soc.iastate.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/504/2024/11/SOC-3104A_2024.pdf.
- ^{viii} Prater, Lisa Foust. "'Brain Drain' Persists in Much of America's Heartland." *Successful Farming*, 21 Dec. 2023, www.agriculture.com/brain-drain-persists-in-much-of-america-s-heartland-8419571.
- ^{ix} “Resource Directory.” *Mahaska Resource Director*, United Way, unitedwaymahaska.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/MC-Resource-Directory-July-2020-Final-1.pdf. Accessed 02 Nov. 2024.
- ^x “Community Services.” *Community Services - Mahaska County, Iowa*, www.mahaskacountyia.gov/community_services/. Accessed 02 Nov. 2024.
- ^{xi} “Helpful Resources: Emergency Management: Wapello County.” *Emergency Management*, Wapello County, www.wapellocounty.org/emergency_management/helpful_resources/. Accessed 06 Nov. 2024.
- ^{xii} “Homepage.” *Davis County*, 4 Sept. 2024, www.daviscountyiowa.gov/. Accessed 06 Nov. 2024.
- ^{xiii} “DC Resource Guide Updated 7.14.22.” Mercy One, July 2022, sites.google.com/view/daviscountyresourceguide/home. Accessed 06 Nov. 2024.
- ^{xiv} “Keokuk County Community Resources.” Keokuk County, keokukcounty.iowa.gov/pdfs/23/Keokuk_Co._Community_Resources_Map.pdf. Accessed 06 Nov. 2024.
- ^{xv} “Van Buren County CSD - Resources: Family Resources.” American Home Founding Association, www.vbcwarriors.org/vnews/display.v/SEC/RESOURCES%7CFamily%20Resources. Accessed 06 Nov. 2024.
- ^{xvi} “Home: Nebraska 211.” *Search.Ne211.Org*, United Way, search.ne211.org/. Accessed 06 Nov. 2024.
- ^{xvii} “Snohomish County Trans and GNC Resource Guide.” *Ingersoll Gender Center*, www.ingersollgendercenter.org/snohomish-resourceguide/. Accessed 6 Nov. 2024.
- ^{xviii} “Disability Resource Guide.” *Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services*, www.okdrs.gov/guide/home. Accessed 6 Nov. 2024.

^{xix} “Summary of Programs.” *USDA Rural Development*, https://www.rd.usda.gov/files/RD_ProgramMatrix.pdf. Accessed 6 Nov. 2024.

^{xx} Fiore, Ann Marie, et al. "Will they stay or will they go? Community features important in migration decisions of recent university graduates." *Economic Development Quarterly* 29.1 (2015): 23-37.