

TECHNOLOGY IN PRACTICE



RESOURCES FOR SENIORS, INC. IMPROVES ACCESS TO COMMUNITY RESOURCE INFORMATION

Resources for Seniors, an Aging and Disability Resource Center (ADRC) serving older adults and persons with disabilities in Wake County, North Carolina, redesigned its website to provide better access to community resource information in its resource database and to provide a mobile-responsive website for visitors. Resources for Seniors (RFS) serves a county area with a rapidly aging population, heightening the need for improving consumer and industry access to information on vital home and community based services.

Background

Changing consumer practices provided an impetus for RFS to undertake a website redesign. The agency was finding that more baby boomers and aging adults were seeking information through the internet. Visits to the RFS website and downloads from the site were increasing. Use of online referral requests increased as well. At health fairs and other community events, more and more individuals were asking for online resources, including people in their 70s and older. Additionally, RFS needed to ensure that consumers could readily search for and find its website. With a change in the way that Google ranked websites, the RFS site would need to be mobile responsive to maintain its consistently high ranking in search results. At the same time, RFS did not have the budget for an expensive website redesign. This situation called for a creative approach to undertaking this technology project.

Implementation

A nontraditional partnership enabled RFS to achieve its technology-related goals. The goals for a mobile-responsive, online resource directory housed within the RFS website included the following elements:

- Searchability using keywords and program names;
- Ability to add search results to a list (i.e., a “cart”) and download the list as a PDF that can be printed or saved;
- Ability to choose what information is included in each program or service listing in the cart; and
- An email subscription component to allow visitors to subscribe to receive information updates, events, and other notices.

RFS’ Director of Information Services reached out to the Department of Computer Engineering at North Carolina State University for help. A team of six students led by Dr. Ben Watson, a professor in the Department, took on the work as a semester project for class credit. This approach reduced the cost of the project dramatically. The students gained valuable, real-world experience and RFS contributed a donation to the Computer Engineering Foundation at the University. Additionally, RFS was able to continue to use its existing resource database software and was provided with new software for the redesigned website through the University. RFS’ Director of Information Services was provided training on this software to be able to maintain and update the site internally.

RFS staff and the student team worked together through the redesign process. The students were given administrative access to the RFS site. In-person meetings and interactive review helped to ensure that the project progressed towards achieving the goals and specifications described in the scope of work. Prior to going live with the redesigned website, RFS provided the beta site to around 60 older adults through senior centers for them to test all aspects of the site and share their thoughts and opinions. This step provided the team with helpful feedback and allowed the student developers to address system glitches and errors before going live.

Impacts

Implementation of the website redesign has benefited individuals, caregivers, and providers—notably healthcare organizations. The site has truly improved access to community resource information, while complementing the assistance provided through RFS' Information Line. Feedback received through the Information Line indicates that more individuals are going to the website first and then calling for additional information and assistance. The online Community Resource Directory is proving to be especially

helpful for long-distance caregivers. Additionally, the “personal cart system” function—familiar to many individuals due to the prevalence of e-commerce—allows individuals, caregivers, and providers to quickly generate a customized resource list that can support decision making.

Healthcare organizations including home care agencies and hospitals are also using the Community Resource Directory with their clients, and both the mobile-responsive design and the cart system have facilitated the use of this online directory by providers. Staff from case managers and social workers to discharge planners are able to more readily access the directory in clinical and community settings using tablets, smartphones, laptops, or other mobile devices. The personal cart system allows care providers to customize resource lists for their clients. A discharge planner, for example, can generate and share a customized list of needed community resources prior to hospital discharge. Providers, individuals, and caregivers can also take advantage of downloadable targeted resource lists that focus on areas such as home care agencies, respite options, subsidized senior housing, and caregiver support groups.

Visit Resources for Seniors at <http://www.resourcesforseniors.com/>.

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