

MAKING THE CONNECTION: PATHFINDER AND THE INFORMATION & REFERRAL COMMUNITY

BY MELISSA FORTSON

The Alliance of Information & Referral Systems (AIRS) recently held its 28th Annual Information & Referral Training and Education Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Among the conference attendees were Tennessee Disability Pathfinder's Claudia Avila-Lopez and Melissa Fortson. Pathfinder, a statewide bilingual information and referral program serving the disability community, is a project of the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Excellence in Developmental Disabilities and the Tennessee Council on Developmental Disabilities.

Pathfinder is a member of both AIRS, the national professional organization of information and referral providers, and Tennessee AIRS (TNAIRS), its state affiliate. All of Pathfinder's full-time staff hold professional certification awarded by AIRS; director Carole Moore-Slater and bilingual social worker Ms. Avila-Lopez are Certified Information & Referral Specialists (CIRS) while Ms. Fortson is a Certified Information & Referral Specialist in Aging (CIRS-A). Ms. Fortson also serves on the TNAIRS board, which helps guide and imple-

ment the AIRS mission on a local level.

Conference highlights included pre-conference training intensives on "The ABC's of Information & Referral" and crisis intervention, as well as workshops addressing the following topics: training, data sharing, juggling the challenges of I&R provision, best practices, consumer empowerment, and more. At a "wrapup" meeting with other Tennessee delegates—among whom were staff from the Greater Nashville Area Agency on Aging & Disability and Middle & East TN 2-1-1—local I&R providers shared information gathered at the conference and discussed opportunities for cooperative staff training and resource sharing. All agreed that they had learned much at the conference that they could immediately apply upon returning to Nashville.

And what, exactly, is Information & Referral? The following, excerpted from the AIRS Web site, explains this unique and important service: *Information and Referral (I&R) is the art, science and practice of bringing people and services together. I&R is an integral part of the overall human services sector. I&R organizations create and maintain databases of programs and services. That information is made available to individuals and communities. People in search of critical services such as emergency financial assistance, food, shelter, child care, jobs, or mental health support*



CLAUDIA AVILA-LOPEZ (LEFT) AND MELISSA FORTSON.
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often do not know where to begin.

Without I&R, looking for help means scanning dozens of phone numbers and contacting a maze of agencies and services in the hope of making the right connection...Most people receive I&R assistance via the telephone... people talk with trained, empathetic I&R Specialists who assess their needs in a non-threatening, non-judgmental and confidential manner, to help them understand their situations and make informed decisions about possible solutions. The I&R Specialist can, when necessary, assist people who are in crisis and emergency situations. I&R Specialists can also advocate on behalf of individuals who need additional support... When individuals and families don't know where to turn, I&R is there for them.

Tennessee Disability Pathfinder remains committed to "being there" for Tennessee's disability community by providing phone, Web, and print resources in English and Spanish. Referral services, free of cost, are provided to persons with disabilities, family members, and service providers.



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