

The Power of Collaboration: Building an Online Library from the Ground Up

The Detroit Community AIDS Library (DCAL) is a virtual library that gives the greater Detroit area easy access to local and worldwide HIV/AIDS information resources. In 1995, health information was not organized well and it took a long time to find simple answers to often complex medical questions. The DCAL set out to change that. For the past nine years, it has constructed an online library from the ground up, conducted outreach programs, and become an invaluable portal of information resources for at-risk communities and health providers who serve Detroit's diverse communities.

Creating the library was no easy task, but the power of collaboration strengthened the process. The following six steps illustrate how this online resource for health consumers was developed:

Step One: Created a team and assessed the community's health information needs.

In the mid-1990s, Linda Draper and her colleagues at Wayne State University's Shiffman Medical Library recognized a need for one primary resource to provide local, state, and national AIDS/HIV information. They felt the need to coordinate the effort because, at that time, local community groups had no easy access to comprehensive AIDS information. Staff from the other Detroit Medical Center Libraries—Children's Hospital of Michigan, Harper Hospital, and the Detroit Public Library—joined Draper's team and set out to develop a collection of AIDS/HIV materials. They couldn't form the collection on their own, however, so they sought help from The National Library of Medicine (NLM).

Step Two: Obtained funding.

An activist within her field, Draper is a member of the NLM and receives the organization's newsletters and grant announcements. In 1995, she came across an issuing of Request for Quotations (RFQ) for AIDS outreach, and she and her team applied for the grant. In their proposal, they explained how they would design a local program that would improve information access for the affected AIDS community and their health providers. The team promised to:

- Provide access to electronic AIDS information resources
- Hold training sessions so that people could learn how to access AIDS-related information online
- Implement access to state-of-the art information via the Internet
- Support organizations in their communities by developing AIDS informational materials that were culturally relevant
- Strengthen document access by connecting with local health libraries that would grant access to their collections and interlibrary loan services

- Form partnerships with community based organizations that provide AIDS-related services to the community.

The NLM awarded Draper and her colleagues an 18-month contract, and the team began to form the necessary community alliances.

Step Three: Partnered with community based-organizations (CBOs).

Partnerships with Detroit CBOs are a vital part of DCAL since the organizations serve to empower local citizens and address health needs within the community. Draper and her team started reaching out to CBOs by sending letters to HIV agencies and inviting them to join the existing team to help centralize HIV information and resources. Three urban CBOs involved in AIDS and HIV health services—the Community Health Awareness Group, Friends Alliance, and Project: Survival—joined the effort, and together they created DCAL and began fulfilling their goals for the program.

Since there is such a high population of Arab Americans in the Detroit area, it was ideal that Draper's team recruit another CBO—the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS)—to partner in the effort. ACCESS has its own Community Health & Research Center that teaches the community how to promote good health and prevent diseases such as AIDS/HIV. Like DCAL and the other CBOs, DCAL and ACCESS work together by utilizing both organizations' community resources, services, and individual contacts.

Step Four: Created, modified and developed the Web site.

Once the partnerships were formed, Draper and her team started building the DCAL's collection of informational resources and community links. At the beginning, DCAL had an actual physical collection within the Shiffman Medical Library, but Draper realized that as the Internet flooded mainstream culture, the Web would be a much easier place for consumers to access AIDS information. While the Shiffman Medical Library does still carry a good number of resources such as videos and medical journals, most of DCAL's services are provided through the Web site.

DCAL started building up the Web site by catering to its consumers' health information needs. For example, AIDS case workers started asking for more general statistics and clinical trial information, so the DCAL staff developed those Web pages on the site. The staff started responding to e-mails, phone calls, and visits from the community. If DCAL's consumers requested that they add things to the Web site, the staff took their requests into serious consideration and did so if needed.

Draper and her team has continued to build upon the Web site, which now contains links to its partnering CBOs, clinical trials, online articles, funding and financial assistance Web sites, hotline and helpline phone numbers, AIDS statistics, local and national online databases, and treatment guidelines. It is a comprehensive resource where the AIDS-infected and -affected community can access relevant local, state,

and national public health information resources. The DCAL site will continue to grow as the community's need for more information increases.

Step Five: Reached out to the community.

Community outreach was and is essential for DCAL to prosper and grow into a reliable community portal for health information, and the DCAL staff has practiced strong outreach efforts from the beginning. In addition to forming strong community ties and partnerships, Draper and her staff utilize other ways to spread the word. For instance, staff members of DCAL:

- *Set up tables at Michigan health fairs.* This provides them with the opportunity to meet other AIDS organizations and affected individuals within the community. Once people from the health fairs contact DCAL and utilize its services, they realize how invaluable DCAL is and they keep coming back for additional help.
- *Attend AIDS conferences where they set up exhibit tables.* Frequently, DCAL conducts workshops at these conferences and may have as many as 60 participants at a time.
- *Reach out to other libraries and obtain resources that consumers need most.* They also figure out who provides AIDS funding, grants, and statistics, and they help with proposal preparations and submissions.
- *Spread the word and recruit community members and organizations to take classes at the Shiffman Medical Library.* Classes cover basic computer skills for adults who have never used computers to more advanced topics like "Health Fraud" and "Finding Quality AIDS Resources." DCAL also conducted a mini-class for a church youth group on HIV and STDs. Teens and their parents attended together, and the DCAL staff taught them how to find quality information on these topics via the Internet.
- *Connect with their partner CBOs to send mass communications.* Through one CBO, DCAL has a fax tree that sends out faxes to every community AIDS organization on a weekly basis. DCAL also publicizes through another group that has a weekly electronic newsletter.

Draper and her colleagues have become experts at reaching out to the Detroit community and providing the best resources to consumers who otherwise may not have easy access to AIDS/HIV health information.

Step Six: Provided an unwavering commitment to serve.

What started as a centralized resource for AIDS information has turned into a model of community and public health information for all users. That unwavering commitment to serve is what has carried DCAL so far in its success. Without dedicated staff members who care about the needs of their consumers, DCAL would just be another site with a few links to AIDS statistics or local health clinics. Librarians *can* make a difference, and the DCAL staff has learned what it takes to reach a collective goal through partnerships and plenty of hard work.

Today DCAL continues to serve local community needs with specialized research, reference collection, and Internet training. The staff is also busy collaborating with the Detroit Health Department (DHD). They are in the process of electronically publishing the DHD's *User-Friendly Manual for Persons Living with HIV/AIDS*. They will continually update the document as they get new information from the DHD and will provide other services as needed.

Useful Links

- Detroit Community AIDS Library (DCAL). <http://www.lib.wayne.edu/dcal>
- Wayne State University's Shiffman Medical Library. <http://www.lib.wayne.edu>
- Detroit Medical Center Libraries. <http://www.dalnet.lib.mi.us/members/dmc>
- The National Library of Medicine. <http://www.nlm.nih.gov>
- Community Health Awareness Group.
<http://www.aidspartnership.org/general.shtml> (Scroll down to "C")
- Friends Alliance. <http://www.friendsalliance.org>
- Project: Survival. http://friendsalliance.org/pub_guide_n-t.html (Scroll down to "P")
- The Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services (ACCESS).
<http://www.accesscommunity.org>
- Detroit Health Department. <http://www.ci.detroit.mi.us/health/default.htm>

Linda Draper, MSLS, Coordinator
Detroit Community AIDS Library (DCAL)
Wayne State University Shiffman Medical Library
Detroit, MI