

Introduction: Open Referral Working Group

NOTE: This memo has been simplified, and this version has been deprecated. See here for the new

version: https://docs.google.com/document/d/16sZXY6nQZJqq-TJaaLY2K3pE2G__q1myYX8JC3ZKHmk/edit

The Working Group will drive the development of the pilot Open Referral model, protocols, assorted tools and documentation. The Working Group will include of subject matter experts, stakeholding institutions, user representatives. Work will be driven by designated leadership that is empowered to make decisions, and those decisions will be tested and evaluated through an iterative process, in partnership with the Local Teams.

Note: this memo is a companion to [the Local Teams proposal](#).

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Scope

The Open Referral working group will establish a minimally-viable set of artifacts, tools, and practices, in alignment with the scope outlined in this document. It's important to note that the scope described below is an overarching vision (based on interviews with people of many perspectives from across the field) — *not necessarily the entirety of what we expect to have in hand at the end of the first phase of the Working Group process*. For the purposes of the initial phase, a minimally viable set of artifacts and tools must primarily meet our pilot projects' need to accomplish their goals of **a)** enabling interoperability of a core set of open resource data shared between heterogeneous resource directory systems, along with **b)** the ability for participants in that project to collaboratively evaluate and improve that data's quality.

Interoperability with existing standards:

- AIRS/211 ([XSD](#) and [taxonomy](#))
- Schema.org/W3C civic services schema
- National Information Exchange Model (NIEM) and the NIEM-based National Human Services Information Architecture ([NHSIA](#) - [logic model](#)) [NOTE: *long-term*]

^NOTE: a rough diagram of this alignment [can be viewed here](#). It needs to be revised.

Delivering the following outputs:

- **A common vocabulary** for service directory data (i.e. [Open Referral alpha spec](#))
- **A methodology for sorting services**, and associated tools and crosswalks to establish interoperability (i.e. [Open Eligibility "tagsonomy"](#)) [NOTE: *long-term*]

- **Protocols for circulation** of this information on the web (i.e. [Ohana API](#), NIEM IEPD)
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Working Group Process

In brief, we see four distinct components of the Working Group's work. We propose that they proceed in iterative and staggered cycles, each one informing the next. (In future phases, they may each merit their own working group.) In brief, these phases are:

- **CONCEPTUAL DESIGN:** Articulating user stories and identifying requirements (prescriptive) and defining the data elements currently in usage (descriptive)
- **TECHNICAL DESIGN:** based on conceptual design output, producing technical artifacts and associated format specifications.
- **IMPLEMENTATION/EVALUATION:** documentation that offers guidance for local implementation, and suggested metrics and means for feedback (which will inform the iteration of conceptual and technical design).
- **GOVERNANCE/SUSTAINABILITY:** deliberation on short-term decision-making and research/proposal for long-term stewardship

Conceptual Design: Who are we building this for, and why?

Objectives:

- **Establish personas and profiles** for our four core user types (help-seeker, service provider, researcher).
- From these personas, **analyze processes** and **identify requirements**.
- **Assay landscape** of existing terminology and standards.

Deliverables:

- **A glossary** of terms in current usage ([early draft](#))
- **User stories** and associated ontological artifacts
- **Functional attributes** of user stories

Active Participants:

- Lead developer (Open Referral core team)
- Designated co-facilitator (subject matter expert with part-time commitment)
- Stakeholder representatives (local team organizer leads and/or reps)
- Vendor representatives
- Provider representatives (AIRS/211)
- NIEM consultant

Technical Design: What is it? How does it work?

Objectives:

- **Implement Conceptual Design** through the development of technical artifacts.
- Establish **alignment with existing standards** (NIEM/NHSIA, AIRS/211, Schema.org)
- Produce **format specifications** and other technical documentation and tools

Deliverables:

- Model of a 'common core' vocabulary
- Information Exchange Package Documentation
- Taxonomic/folksonomic methodology and crosswalks
- Format specifications

Active Participants:

- Lead developer (from core Open Referral team)
- Co-facilitator (designated part-time leader with subject matter expertise and technical expertise)
- Vendor and referral provider representatives
- Google.org representative
- NIEM consultant

Implementation/Evaluation: How should it be applied? What should be tested, and how?

Objectives:

- Develop **operational documentation**, tools, and training materials that can help local teams and partners adopt the standard and evaluate its viability.
- Identify and **document key assumptions** and support Local Teams as they test those assumptions.
- **Synthesize feedback** from Local Teams, and manage the channels of communications between teams and Design Workgroups, so that Local Teams' feedback guides the iterative development of standards.
- **Evaluate outcomes and propose pivots**, if necessary.

Deliverables:

- A **'road map'** towards application and adoption of the standard, including suggested tools and processes for development and testing.
- **Documentation of Local Team outputs** and associated feedback.
- **Cyclical reports, including Final Report**, to Standards Table and external community.

Active Participants:

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- Open Referral COO and/or lead pilot organizers
- Designated co-facilitator with part-time commitment (presumably, someone with project management expertise and subject familiarity)
- Stakeholder representatives (local team leads)
- Vendor and provider representatives
- Government advisement
- Code for America brigade representatives and other civic hacker experts

Governance/Sustainability: How will we make decisions? How will we sustain this capacity over time?

Objectives:

- Monitor Open Referral pilot process; field and/or propose tweaks to process on cyclical basis.
- **Establish plan for post-pilot management** of standard and community.

Deliverables:

- **Cyclical reviews** of Open Referral process and proposed adjustments based on feedback and learnings.
- **Proposal(s)** for long-term stewardship of Open Referral standard.

Active Participants:

- Stakeholder representatives (local team leads)
- Core Open Referral leadership
- Code for America government partnerships manager
- Subject matter (standards) expert
- Provider representatives
- Vendor representatives
- Government stakeholders

Roles

Each of the above branches of work may require particular skillsets and unique roles. But we expect each group to consist of two designated leadership positions: **a leader** and **a coordinator**.

The leader will be responsible for researching, articulating and prioritizing the requirements for their workgroup, according to [the given scope](#) (the interests of our four user types; interoperability; components of the standard). The coordinator will be responsible for tracking progress, facilitating meetings, addressing obstacles, etc.

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Members of the Open Referral Core Team (including: Chief Organizing Officer, Ohana Development Lead, and possibly Local Team Lead Organizers) will by default occupy one of these two leadership positions in each group. The other positions will be nominated by the Open Referral community.

We expect these positions to demand between 5-10 hours of work per week. Core Open Referral staff can work with prospective leadership to help fundraise for the cost of their participation, if necessary.

The rest of each group should consist of some combination of stakeholder representatives, subject matter experts, software vendors and referral system providers. The designated leadership of each team can determine their specific needs and recruit accordingly. Note that feedback from vendors and referral providers is sought and valued, but stakeholder representatives will set priorities, make decisions, and evaluate outcomes.

Communications Channels

How should groups form, communicate internally, and communicate to each other?

Should there be separate Google Groups for each group? Some other tools?

Calendar

How often should groups convene together (if virtually)?

How long should a standards development cycle be?

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Message to Open Referral forum, initiating the Working Group formation.

The working group process will be cyclical - the group will form, do some work, hand over that work, and be re-formed (possibly in a new composition, or even as multiple groups). For this first cycle, I'm calling for a three month timeline. The output of the working group will essentially be hypotheses in the form of artifacts that can be implemented, tested, evaluated, and revised in future cycles.

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Core deliverable: The working group's core deliverable is a common vocabulary model (including both technical and plain-English terms) with associated documents that guide its implementation. **Our lead on this core deliverable will be Sophia Parafina**, whose work in this capacity is funded by the Knight Foundation and sponsored by Code for America. **Sophia's role will be listening, clarifying, synthesizing input, and making (and accounting for) decisions in the case of conflicting perspectives.** Sophia has worked in standards development before, and I am thrilled we have her experience in the mix.

Collateral: Based on interviews and what best practices we can see, we expect that in addition to a common model (in CSV format) the working group will produce a) a glossary (of both technical terms and plain-English phrases currently in usage), b) case scenarios based on our local teams' user stories, with enumerated functional and technical requirements, c) implementation roadmap including explicitly stated hypothesis and criteria for evaluation, d) regular reportbacks to the group, and e) end-of-cycle proposal(s) for the structure/process of future cycles. Ideally, each of these will be bottom-lined by one or two specific working group members.

There could be additional collateral that working group (and/or open forum) members propose to produce. And of course people are welcome to produce artifacts of their own initiative and share with the group in hopes that they might prove to be useful. **We should just be clear that our Local Team Project Leads (Sameer and Jenn) are our product owners: given the likelihood that there's more that the working group would like to do than that which it can do, Sameer and Jenn will choose the priorities among all possible outputs.**

Composition:

We are going to start this process with a group size capped at the nice familiar number of seven. (Assuming there is enough interest, Sophia and I will be considered 'facilitators' and not members of the group.) Here's my best take on the ideal composition of this group:

- representatives of a mix of vendors who provide software that connects people to services, including a mix of those who serve I&R systems, as well as software provided directly to end-users (service organizations, help seekers, etc)
- experienced practitioners who aren't employed by any one vested institutions but who have experience working toward interoperability between systems
- academics with specialties in information science and related geekery
- people with prior experience in standards-development of some sort

I welcome suggestions as to what skills and experiences should be included in the working group, but also reserve the right to make decisions (which will in turn be evaluated for future cycles). I want to make two criteria explicit in my decisionmaking: first, I will give prerogative to nominations specifically made by the Alliance of Information and Referral Systems. Second, I do not want to work with a group that consists entirely of men; aside from other considerations, in my experience, groups with a balance of genders simply tend to listen more carefully and make better decisions.

Timeline: we should get this started as soon as possible, ideally with work underway by the end of next week. The cadence of the group is to an extent up to the group to establish -- but I expect at least

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bi-weekly virtual meetings (and suspect a separate but openly viewable Google group may be in order). As I mentioned, we're going to try a three month cycle to start: a two month build-up before our mid-summer network gathering in July (more on that soon) and a month post-gathering to wrap up loose ends before closing the cycle.

Commitment: Ultimately, the level of investment is up to working group members, but I expect that at least a couple of hours a week is involved, with occasional periods of more intense investments. The Open Referral initiative cannot at this time fund the work of working group members, but I can offer some of my time in helping interested and qualified parties build whatever capacity they need in order to participate. This may look like supporting your request to powers-that-be at work, or it may look like supporting your requests for funding from somewhere. Of course that will probably take some time, so we are likely looking for people who are able to step up in their free time (or who get permission from their employer) at least for this first cycle - but one way or another, if you're interested, we want to hear from you.