

COMING OF AGE

Linking Ohio's seniors

Elyria man builds Web site

Finding information about services for older adults, senior housing, health care or benefits requires paging through tele-



By Karen McNally Bensing

phone books, human services directories and guidebooks. To get schedules of activities, classes or programs, you must call organizations offering them and ask to be put on mailing lists.

For those searching for services outside their own com-

munity, the task is even more challenging. The locale and service providers are unfamiliar and finding telephone numbers means lots of calls to directory assistance.

Besides being time-consuming, information seekers may discover that phone numbers and names listed may have changed. The newest providers may not have made the deadline for inclusion making the directory out-of-date even before it goes to press.

Thanks to the Internet, gathering information for and about older adults has become faster, easier and more accurate. A growing number of Web sites offer access to lists of service providers, benefit information, even calendars of events and activities. Unlike print directories, Web sites can be updated as often as new information becomes available to the site's owner.

For those without home computers, libraries and many senior centers provide computers with Internet access along with instruction in their use.

Among the newest senior Web sites is OhioSeniors, created by Elyria resident Michael McCray, which came online earlier this year. OhioSeniors calls itself the "Internet gateway for the senior community of Ohio."



DAVID L. ANDERSEN / PLAIN DEALER PHOTOGRAPHER

Michael McCray with the second page of OhioSeniors Web site. A self-taught computer expert with a journalism degree from Kent State University, McCray designed the site himself and does all the data entry and technical tasks.

As an outreach program coordinator at an eye clinic, McCray became aware of the unmet need of older adults and their families for accurate sources of information.

A self-taught computer expert with a journalism degree from Kent State University, McCray designed the site himself and does all the data entry and technical tasks.

"I get up at 3 a.m. to work on it, for an hour or two," he says. "I'm constructing the site bit by bit, concentrating on one area at a time."

McCray began his labors in March with senior centers and nursing homes in Northeast Ohio because they were the easiest to identify, he says. He plans to expand coverage to the entire state. He collects his information from existing print guides and updates it before adding it to his database.

OhioSeniors is attractive and easy to use, even for Internet novices. After logging on to the site, users start with a map of Ohio, divided into 12 sections showing all 88 counties.

Users click the computer mouse button on the section of the state they are interested in. A grid displaying a list of resources, organized by county appears. Users select from among senior centers, senior apartments, nursing homes, retirement communities, hospitals, senior health maintenance organizations, home health and day-care providers.

Another click of the mouse but-

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

Contact Michael McCray by e-mail at:

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The OhioSeniors Web site is at:

<http://www.OhioSeniors.com>

ton on one of these categories displays service providers along with addresses and phone numbers. Those organizations that have their own Web sites are highlighted on the screen. By clicking on one of these, users are connected to the Web site that shows more detailed information about the organization, often including list hours of operation, schedules of activities, staff lists, even a photo of the facility.

There's more to OhioSeniors than resources, however. News items put users in touch with national, state and local stories of interest to older adults. Recent features discussed new Medicare coverage for mammograms and osteoporosis screenings.

Online classified ads advise older job hunters or those seeking work in aging services of employment opportunities. Crime prevention tips alert Web site users to the latest telemarketing scams.

Commentary from area congressional representatives on issues of interest to the aging community is posted.

Each month, the site highlights a senior center and senior Web site of the month and displays the "Ohio Nature Photo of the Month," taken by McCray, a nature photographer. (July's photo was a close-up of a dragonfly.)

Areas "under construction" include bulletin boards and chat rooms where older adults can communicate with one another online about hobbies and health care or exchange recipes and views on politics. McCray plans to feature articles on health topics and perhaps historical articles and reminiscences written by older adults themselves.

Like print directories, OhioSeniors is only as good as the information provided to it. McCray encourages organizations from all over the state with programs for those over 55 to submit calendars and press releases to be considered for posting — by mail or e-mail.

McCray is available to help senior centers or service providers set up their own Web pages and link them with the OhioSeniors site.

Bensing is the librarian for the Benjamin Rose Institute in Cleveland. She appears on "Senior Connection," a weekly radio show, discussing information and issues of interest to older adults as well as topics of future columns. The program airs from