



# Building Capacity: Braiding Priorities to Staff Your IRIS Network

## Replicable Approach

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Building an IRIS network requires stakeholders that share a vision and commitment to a collaborative process. To implement and sustain the work, one or more local leaders with the willingness and capacity to guide implementation must step forward. In a landscape where service providers and community leaders are already overextended, some communities have found insufficient leadership capacity to be a barrier to implementation. Designated IRIS staff positions can be one solution to this challenge. In one Kansas community, a stakeholder's knowledge of local challenges and their creative vision for braiding solutions allowed a network to create a new staff position. This position will lead the work of implementing IRIS as part of their community's COVID-19 recovery plan.

### ***"I knew we needed IRIS before it even existed."***

As Special Education Director of the Northwest Kansas Educational Services Center (NKESC), which serves 19 school districts across 12 Kansas counties, the challenges associated with identifying needs and coordinating services for families had long been on Kathy Kersenbrock-Ostmeyer's mind. The obstacles faced in this rural region are stories we hear all too often: geography (the NKESC's service area is over 12,000 square miles), limited resources, and inconsistent developmental screening and referral processes. Despite these challenges, the Early Childhood Coordinating Council (EC3) is bolstered by strong leadership and a history of creative collaborations and partners shared a vision for an integrated approach to developmental health in their community. EC3 saw an opportunity and future where all children are screened for needs, leveraging IRIS to streamline communication between partners to set families on the path to getting help.

"Data shows that our community is under-identifying children at risk for developmental or social emotional delays. We need to find children earlier and ensure their families receive warm handoffs to supports and services," Kathy says. While the need was clear, capacity concerns, namely the staff time needed to coordinate screening events, assist partners in adopting ASQ screening tools, and lead IRIS implementation among the network of partners, were barriers to moving forward.

***"During COVID-19 an existing weakness got worse."***

COVID-19 disrupted opportunities to identify needs for families and young children as medical appointments and community developmental screening events were cancelled. As a result, the number of young children identified in need of developmental supports and other community services dropped, and referral coordination became more fragmented. When relief funds for school districts and special education service centers were included in the CARES Act in March 2021, Kathy recognized the opportunity to fund improvements to address her community's persistent developmental health promotion needs.

**Staffing the Community Need**

Braiding together several intertwined community challenges, Kathy envisioned a new staff role—Child Find Facilitator—that would bring the leadership capacity needed to implement an integrated developmental screening and referral system in the community. Demonstrating that the position would address a COVID-19 need, Kathy included funding for the Child Find Facilitator position in her school district's Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) expenditure.

The Child Find Facilitator will coordinate and scale developmental screening activities, implement and manage the state-funded community ASQ Online Enterprise System, and lead IRIS implementation. Integrating responsibilities for partner engagement, training, workflow development, and technical assistance for both ASQ Online and IRIS in one staff position will ensure that community partners receive consistent messaging and one-stop help for all questions related to developmental screening and referrals. "Adding a Child Find Facilitator to our community will remove barriers and make it simpler for community partners to conduct screenings and make referrals," Kathy says.

**Apply Lessons from this Approach**

Many communities can relate to the need for dedicated leadership time and capacity to impact needed systems change and coordination. Lessons learned from this approach highlight the opportunity to creatively address this need.

- **Involve education:** "Education can be siloed," Kathy says. "Networking and collaboration with community partners supports education's goals of serving the whole child and family. Using IRIS, we can get families where they need to go to get and stay healthy." If you don't have an existing relationship with your local school district, the Early Childhood Coordinator or Part B-Early Special Education Program Coordinator is a good place to start building this partnership.
- **Dream today:** "I believe other communities can fund IRIS positions with an approach similar to ours," Kathy says. Her community's vision for a Child Find Facilitator position long predated the availability of ESSER funds. Having a general sense of the position's role, key responsibilities, and how it would help meet the community's goals readied Kathy to act when funding emerged. Engage the community in crafting a vision for staffing to support IRIS and share that vision widely so the need is on radars as funding opportunities arise.

- ***Braid IRIS with complimentary priorities:*** IRIS is only one component of a healthy family support ecosystem. In Kathy's community, the Child Find Facilitator role naturally aligned with a state-driven initiative to implement a Statewide ASQ Online System. Cultivate creative partnerships and expand IRIS's impact by identifying the goals IRIS aligns with in your community. Consider the role of IRIS in supporting your community's COVID-19 recovery plan and share your vision for how increased IRIS leadership capacity will improve how families get the help they need.

For more information about this approach contact Kathy Kersenbrock-Ostmeyer at [kko@nkesc.org](mailto:kko@nkesc.org).