



Centering Empathy and Connections in the Kankakee IRIS Network

Kankakee's Community Story

Contributors:

Julie Herzog

Natasha Welsh-Miller

Kailee Zito

"We've grown from a referral network to a more unified community." - Kailee Zito, IRIS System and Data Manager

The IRIS referral network in Kankakee County, Illinois, led by the Kankakee County Health Department, is characterized by its client-centered approach. They are defined by their mission to amplify empathy as a driver of successful resource connections and their innovative inclusion of KAN-I Help with IRIS to promote service delivery. For their community, success hinges upon understanding the unique factors influencing families' needs within broader social contexts. By prioritizing trust and incorporating warm handoffs from the outset, they foster stronger client-organization relationships and effectively address social determinants of health, ultimately leading to improved outcomes.

Before implementing the IRIS system, many partners in Kankakee County were unaware of the range of resources available to families in their community. This left families uncertain about how to connect with the support they needed. To address this confusion, the Kankakee IRIS leadership team sought ways to streamline the process of informing residents about available services. One such innovative method was the alignment between KAN-I Help, an existing local resource that connects residents with providers, and IRIS. The services provided through KAN-I Help were aligned with the service filters accessible to partners in IRIS. This conceptual integration simplified care coordination and strengthened Kankakee's growing centralized community network.

Although Kankakee is smaller than many neighboring counties, it has a dedicated group of partners from various sectors contributing their expertise to the broader network. By working together, community partners have fostered a shared awareness of the community's needs, breaking down silos and promoting inter-organizational collaboration. This universal approach ensures that conversations about local needs occur within individual organizations and the entire IRIS network.

"Wrap-around service for the whole person and addressing every need in a whole person's life is practiced... We all know that each [person] is going to have different needs. And I think there is

more of a movement and culture to be more willing to address all of those needs and less of a thought of 'we are here for this one specific job'." – **Kailee Zito.**

Kankakee County IRIS partners envision a referral network that prioritizes empathy and fosters meaningful connections with referred families. Behind every referral is a person with unique needs and circumstances. The network can better understand and address individual needs by centering empathy in every interaction, ensuring families feel more connected to service providers.

This fusion of empathy-driven support with technology ensures a holistic, responsive service delivery system that fosters trust and encourages clients to return for follow-up appointments. Through strong communication and collaboration, Kankakee County's IRIS partners have minimized service gaps, creating a more streamlined and effective process. Despite challenges like staff turnover, partners maintain open communication, adapt to changes, and continue building partnerships that ensure no client or family falls through the cracks. At the heart of this work are the relationships that make it possible.