



Modeling the Way: Building a Trusted IRIS Network in DeKalb

IRIS in Illinois | Community Story

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"We're constantly communicating with our partners...we send updates, troubleshoot together, and make sure they know we're here." — Hillary Cali, Community Navigator for DeKalb ROE

In DeKalb County, Illinois, implementing IRIS was a strategic, community-led initiative built on trust, shared purpose, and adaptability. Guided by a clear vision and a committed leadership team, this community is steadily developing a system that reflects the community's unique strengths and needs. DeKalb's IRIS journey began with a bold yet focused goal: to reduce barriers for families seeking access to services, particularly in mental and behavioral health support.

Drawing inspiration from neighboring Illinois IRIS network models, the Regional Office of Education (ROE) leads the work in the community, leveraging its deep connections to schools and early childhood programs. At the heart of their IRIS network is a leadership team guided by their community knowledge. Hillary Cali is the "boots-on-the-ground" Community Navigator. Her grant-funded position was established to support the implementation of IRIS within the community. She is responsible for partner onboarding and community outreach and works to improve care coordination throughout their referral network. Ashley Hughes, the Communications Manager, brings a data and communications lens to support partners and promote IRIS across the community.

A strong ROE team supports them, including Amanda Christensen, the Regional Superintendent, and Carmen Siragusa, the Assistant Superintendent, who provides strategic oversight and support. Monique Shaw and Sam McDavid, employees at the ROE, contribute valuable insight and leadership from their work with early childhood and school-aged children. Together, this team brings a deep understanding of the local landscape and a strong commitment to improving coordination for families.

Starting Internally, Growing Intentionally

When DeKalb launched its IRIS network in August 2022, they began with a cohort of internal ROE programs, choosing a phased implementation approach rather than launching IRIS throughout the entire community at once. "We launched internally first with our own programs," Hillary explained. "It gave us time to understand the system, figure out how we wanted referrals to work, and model the kind of partner engagement we hoped to see."

This initial phase included ROE programs like the BASICS team, Family Success, Student Success, McKinney-Vento, and DAYS for youth mentoring. These programs were already referring families to one another informally. Formalizing those pathways through IRIS helped clarify processes and build expertise that set them up for success as they expanded. From there, the team prioritized expanding to partners with existing MOUs, determining fit based on their referral needs and overall readiness.

Building a Culture of Trust and Accountability

Since their launch, DeKalb's number of engaged partners has grown significantly, increasing from 7 in 2022 to 111 in 2025. As more partners are onboarded into the community, they have successfully maintained an average 50% enrolled in services rate over the past two years. This success is the result of consistent, intentional work as their leadership team models community best practices.

Hillary plays a key role by personally making and receiving referrals. By using the system from a partner's perspective, she is able to proactively address challenges and share valuable insights. Additionally, the leadership team collaborates closely with its partners to identify the right users, support problem-solving, and maintain clear, open lines of communication. This consistent engagement has fostered a culture of trust and accountability that strengthens the network. "We onboard organizations that are fully prepared and excited to engage in the work ahead," Hillary explained.

Lessons and Learnings

For those looking to replicate the success achieved by the DeKalb IRIS leaders, they offer the following advice: stay proactive and deeply invested in the work. They emphasize that engaging with IRIS and talking about it effectively is a skill that takes time to develop but is critical to generating buy-in among partners. By learning how to speak about the system in ways that resonate with their partners, they can demonstrate IRIS's value for others and walk alongside partners as they learn the system.

They also stress the importance of flexibility—adapting to changing processes and tailoring implementation to the unique context of their community. Needs will vary, and progress depends on knowing the community landscape: who your champions are, who is ready to engage, and what barriers might stand in the way. DeKalb's success has come from that deep understanding of their community—where to lean in, who to bring to the table, and how to build relationships rooted in trust and shared goals.

In these ways, the DeKalb team has laid a strong foundation for long-term success through thoughtful planning, relationship-building, and a deep understanding of their community. Their journey is a powerful reminder that meaningful systems change happens when communities lead with purpose, stay connected, and grow together. Looking ahead, the DeKalb team has focused goals: onboarding more schools, incorporating healthcare systems into the network, and expanding into aging services to meet the full spectrum of community needs. They aim to double the number of partners next year while continuing to lead with intention and care.