



Network Growth and Engagement

IRIS in Kansas and Missouri

Contributors:

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“That’s a big reason we’ve been so successful growing our network – we have buy-in with our partners.” — Mandi LaRue, Recruitment Coordinator, Greater KC Metro IRIS Network

After recognizing the multifaceted needs of Kansas City families, local leadership teams from the Jackson County (Missouri), Johnson County (Kansas), and Wyandotte County (Kansas) IRIS Networks merged into the Greater KC Metro network to offer a more varied selection of resources. Since its launch in March 2022, the network has made incredible strides toward their vision of strengthening the support they provide to families in their region. From nearly doubling the number of referral partners, to over 150 active organizations, to strategically growing their network's referral landscape to include community resources from all sectors, the work of the Greater KC Metro Network has resulted in over 4300 referrals being sent, connecting over 2500 families to services to meet their needs. Throughout this period of immense growth, the network has sought to identify community-based service providers that serve as resource connection points while fostering a collaborative environment with their local partners.

The Greater KC Metro's collaborative approach to network expansion centers on the importance of building relationships with their current partners, communicating service gaps to those partners, and asking them for recommendations of agencies that provide those services and, when possible, direct connections to those entities. The leadership team makes these vital connections to service providers through their Community Advocates, who Mandi LaRue, the network's Recruitment Coordinator, describes as *“people in our community who really see the value in IRIS and are talking about IRIS every chance they get, then connecting the leadership team to those resources.”*

When asked how they develop and foster that buy-in, Amanda Holm, IRIS Champion from Jackson County, Missouri, said giving their partners space to discover the value IRIS brings to their organization and a method to voice the issues they are seeing and the vision they have for the network is essential. By encouraging their partners to contribute to the growth and direction of their IRIS network, they all share ownership of the network and its future. In addition to providing space for input and feedback, the local leadership team also provides partners with opportunities

to share about their programs and the services they provide during meetings and newsletters, increasing all partners' awareness of resources available within the network.

As the network grows and changes, the Greater KC Metro leadership team is also noticing the emergence of additional referral hubs, those organizations in the community that play a critical role in connecting families to services. One of these hubs, Kansas City Kansas Public Schools, has embraced its role as a connection point to various organizations and providers. Through their high volume of quality referrals, they have *"figured out how to utilize so many different sectors, [with] all of their referrals going to different organizations, even across state lines."* There are many more referral hubs, including the Project Eagle Connections program and the local WIC organizations, leading regional cross-sector referrals. These organizations are essential entry points for families, connecting them to many supports – from food, housing, and rent support to free health clinics and mental health providers.

Through the many accomplishments the Greater KC Metro IRIS Network has achieved it was not without learning some lessons along the way. When asked what the greatest lessons learned were, leadership team members agreed that learning to be patient and trusting the process was key. Recruitment efforts can be taxing, but staying grounded and authentic to the network's vision, building relationships, and finding the right person at an organization can make all the effort pay off. There were also many lessons to be learned through merging the county-specific networks, including aligning visions and standards, and navigating the roles and responsibilities of the leaders. *"Though the merger was not easy, it resulted in a very valuable asset to the community,"* Mandi said. *"Because of how close this city is and how people move, this merger has created a truly Greater KC Metro community."*

Looking towards the future of their network, the Greater KC Metro IRIS network leaders, which include staff from Community Health Council of Wyandotte County, Jackson County Public Health, Johnson County Health Department, and Project Eagle, are committed to expanding and strengthening the network, facilitating the natural interconnectedness of their communities, and ensuring families are connected to the right services at the right time. If you are interested in learning more about the Greater KC Metro IRIS Network, contact Mandi LaRue at Mandi.LaRue@jocogov.org