



Strengthening Community Health Through Technology

The IRIS Approach and Community Health Workers

Successful Approaches

Developed in 2016 by the University of Kansas Center for Public Partnerships and Research (KU-CPPR), IRIS is an online bi-directional referral tool that streamlines communications between community providers offering services to individuals and families. Built upon evidence-based practices and supported through collaborative relationships, the Integrated Referral and Intake System (IRIS) helps partners identify available resources, make referrals, and monitor whether families receive the help they request. In addition, the IRIS tool is paired with an implementation process that guides communities in facilitating change and connecting families to health and social service programs.

Adopting innovative technologies such as IRIS relies on collaborative learning, taking risks, and embracing failures. All IRIS networks are led by local leaders who build relationships with service and care providers to create an interconnected system that supports families. The roles and responsibilities of many Community Health Workers (CHWs) lend themselves naturally to this work. Their intimate knowledge of the community provides the experience necessary to guide partners through successful implementation and to champion IRIS adoption in their community.

CHWs involved in implementing IRIS in their community seek to improve care access through advocacy, education, connections, and trust that advances individual and community health. IRIS supports CHWs as they

work to create coordinated referral networks to assist the communities they serve. Through an approach like IRIS (referral technology paired with collaborative relationships and process alignment among community partners), CHWs can implement referral best practices efficiently by building relationships with partners and connecting them to a broader network of services. All community partners can make effective referrals by knowing available service options, explaining eligibility requirements and potential accessibility barriers, and monitoring referral progress and loop closure.

IRIS also provides communities with the agency to choose what information they collect from their clients to identify referral barriers. Depending on the community's vision and needs, clients' data might include race and ethnicity, gender, primary language, income, insurance status, etc. Reviewing this data in the context of referral outcomes allows CHWs, and their community partners, to understand and address inequities in access to services. The connections built through IRIS enable all community organizations to cultivate relationships, building a strong net to ensure families are seen, heard, and provided with quality care and resources.

In many instances, CHWs champion existing efforts in communities to promote the health and well-being of their constituents by addressing systematic challenges. Through this process, their knowledge and understanding of the collaboration landscape support organizations by providing partner service and

resource coordination to their community. When positioned as IRIS leaders, CHWs can reach diverse audiences within communities, which is crucial to overcoming common implementation stress points – such as a lack of partner buy-in, systemic inequities, or under-represented community voice.

The IRIS approach strengthens collaboration and communication between families and service providers. Committed to supporting visions for positive change, IRIS seeks to ensure the needs of organizations and families are met by willingly collaborating with community champions, partners, and policymakers to build networks that allow communities to thrive.

Conversations with developers, funders, and community partners need to recognize the benefit of technology that supports partnerships and meets the unique needs of organizations and the families they serve. The IRIS approach, paired with the platform and led by the community, fosters a collaborative, cross-system approach to build a successful multi-sector coordinated network to ensure communities are connected to support thriving families. Most importantly, individuals and families experience positive health and social well-being outcomes with the support of the communities where they live and work.