



Building Stronger Early Childhood Systems Through Community Partnerships

Contributors:

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CONFERENCE INFORMATION

DATE

April 28-30, 2026, 10:00 - 2:30 PM CST

EVENT

[Illinois Action For Children | Partner Plan Act](#)

Julie Herzog from the IRIS Team and Kailee Zito from the Kankakee County IRIS Network (IL) presented at the Illinois Action for Children Partner Plan Act conference in April 2026. Their presentation highlighted how the Kankakee County Health Department is using IRIS to strengthen coordinated referrals, support early childhood systems, and improve how families connect to community resources.

Their presentation, *Building Stronger Early Childhood Systems Through Community Partnerships*, emphasized the importance of coordinated communication between organizations, without which families could be left to navigate services on their own and face uncertainty about where to turn for help. Before IRIS, partners in Kankakee County were often unaware of the full range of resources available, making it difficult to provide consistent, connected support for families.

The Kankakee County Health Department now uses IRIS to connect organizations, strengthen collaboration, and improve how families access services. What began as a cross-sector collaboration evolved to meet the community's early childhood priorities while continuing to support whole-family needs. By simplifying referral processes and improving communication between organizations, IRIS has helped local partners collaborate more effectively and ensure families are successfully connected to the services they need.

Embedding Empathy into Community Systems

Empathy was a central theme throughout the presentation. Every family brings unique experiences, strengths, and challenges; effective referral coordination begins by listening without judgment and understanding each family's individual circumstances.

The presentation challenged participants to consider how empathy can impact health outcomes. By creating coordinated referral pathways, fostering trusted partnerships, and centering family voice, communities can build systems that reflect empathy in the way organizations work together. In this way, empathy becomes part of how the community supports families every day—making it easier to access services and reducing the burden of navigating multiple systems.

Strengthening Referral Pathways in Kankakee County

A closer look at the Kankakee County IRIS Network demonstrates how cross-sector partners work together to create seamless connections for families. In Figure 1, each circle represents a partner organization, with larger circles indicating higher referral activity. The programs in yellow are part of the community's early childhood system, while those in green indicate organizations associated with other sectors, such as behavioral health or education. Together, these organizations form a connected network that helps families access resources more efficiently while reducing fragmentation across systems.

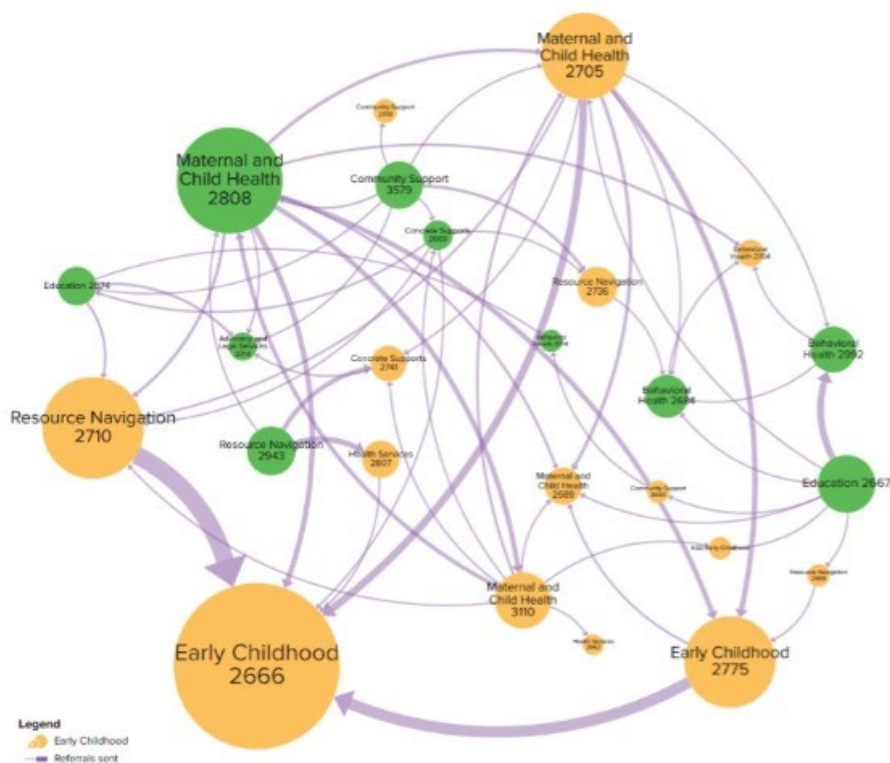


Figure 1.

The presentation concluded by emphasizing an "our families" approach, encouraging early childhood, public health, and community partners to view referral coordination as a shared responsibility. By strengthening partnerships, adapting workflows, centering family voice, and leading with empathy, Kankakee County continues to demonstrate how coordinated referral systems can serve as community infrastructure that supports children, families, and the organizations who serve them.