



Connecting Families Through Coordinated Community Referrals

Julie Herzog from the IRIS Team presented at the Illinois Head Start Association Annual Conference in March 2026. Her presentation, *Connecting Families Through Coordinated Community Referrals*, highlights how Head Start and Early Head Start programs within the Tazewell, Peoria, Woodford (TPW) IRIS community are improving family outcomes by strengthening how families access and navigate community supports.

Families often interact with multiple systems simultaneously; without coordination between providers, navigating services can be fragmented and overwhelming. Historically, organizations maintained their own referral processes — relying on personal relationships, emails, phone calls, and separate tracking methods—which limited visibility into whether families ultimately received services. By centering referral practices as a core component of family support, coordination becomes not an added task, but an essential part of effective, relationship-driven service delivery.

Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) programs play a critical role as trusted partners within the TPW IRIS network. Through intake, home visits, and ongoing engagement, staff are uniquely positioned to identify needs early and guide families through available resources. These programs act as connectors—coordinating referrals, maintaining communication with partners, and ensuring follow-up so families successfully access services, particularly during key transitions. They frequently connect families to a range of supports, including Early Intervention, health and dental care, mental and behavioral health services, WIC and food pantries, housing and utility assistance and childcare assistance.

Once needs are identified, HS/EHS staff work collaboratively with families to determine the best path forward, often providing “warm handoffs” by directly connecting them to community resources in IRIS. They don’t stop at the referral—staff follow up, address barriers, and continue supporting families to ensure connections are successful. This coordinated, relationship-based approach reduces the burden on families and increases the likelihood that they receive the services they need.

Strengthening Referral Pathways Across TPW IRIS

A closer look at IRIS referral pathways within TPW Early Head Start and Head Start programs show how families move through the community’s network. In Fig. 1, each circle represents a partner organization, with larger circles indicating higher referral activity.

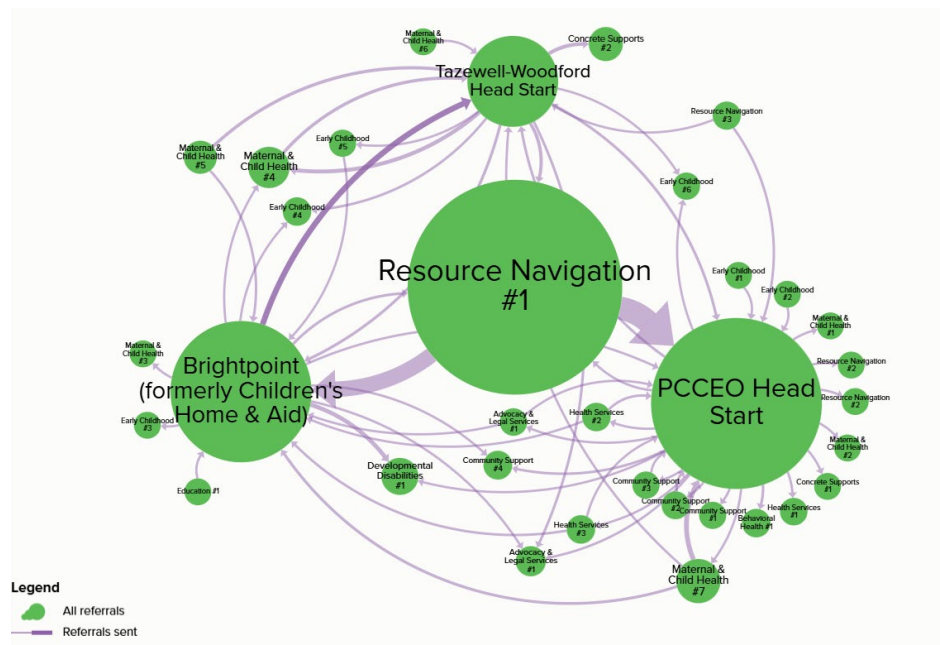


Fig. 1 Referral Pathways in TPW Programs

In TPW, the Resource Navigation program plays a key role in coordinating access to home visiting services by helping connect families to the most appropriate program based on their needs and eligibility. Head Start and Early Head Start build on this by continuing to support families beyond that initial connection – identifying additional needs, linking families to other community resources, and staying engaged to ensure those connections are successful. Together, this creates a more coordinated experience for families and helps ensure they receive the support they need across multiple systems.

Families are often simultaneously navigating early childhood and home visiting, healthcare, mental and behavioral health, food and nutrition, and child care needs. For many families, these systems are deeply interconnected and navigating them independently can be overwhelming. By strengthening these connections, Head Start and Early Head Start programs help ensure families are not just referred but successfully connected to the supports they need—leading to stronger outcomes for children and families.