



Mapping Connections in Your Community

Communities are made up of many systems, each with their own expertise, priorities, and ways of working. While these systems may operate independently, the individuals and families they serve often navigate several at once.

This exercise is designed to help communities identify gaps in their existing networks, explore opportunities to strengthen connections across sectors, and envision how building these bridges can create a more coordinated, whole-family system of support.

IDENTIFYING THE BRIDGES: A COMMUNITY MAPPING EXERCISE

As IRIS Communities grow and evolve, their networks may develop around populations, priorities, or service areas. Over time, opportunities may emerge to connect with additional sectors whose expertise could help address needs that are not fully supported through existing referral pathways. Identifying these opportunities begins with understanding how individuals and families experience the current system of support.

The following four considerations offer a framework for IRIS Local Leaders and partners to reflect on their existing network, recognize gaps in coverage, and envision the connections that could help create a more coordinated, whole-family approach.

1. Understand the Existing Landscape

Where are individuals and families already turning for support?

Every IRIS Community includes organizations that serve as trusted entry points for individuals and families seeking services, such as healthcare providers, schools, health departments, and other community-based organizations. Recognizing where people already turn for support helps make the existing network of relationships more visible, including where partners may encounter needs that extend beyond their own services.

Questions for Community Reflection

- Where do individuals and families in our community already turn for help, information, or trusted support?
- Which existing IRIS partners may encounter needs that extend beyond the services they provide?
- What do we know about how individuals and families are currently connected to support across sectors?

2. Recognize What's Missing

Which services, organizations, or sectors could help address gaps in our network?

As communities consider their existing landscape, opportunities may emerge to connect with organizations or sectors that are not currently represented in their IRIS network. These gaps may become apparent when partners recognize recurring needs but lack a clear pathway to appropriate support. Understanding what is missing can help communities identify where additional expertise or relationships could strengthen network coverage.

Questions for Community Reflection

- Where are needs being recognized, but partners are unsure where to connect someone for support?
- Which services or sectors are missing or underrepresented in our IRIS community?
- What organizations or expertise in the broader community could help address these gaps?

3. Explore Existing Connections

Where are relationships and referral pathways already established?

Even when a sector is not well represented in IRIS, connections may already exist through informal referrals, shared initiatives, or relationships between community partners. Recognizing these connections can reveal opportunities to build on existing trust and collaboration rather than starting from scratch.

Questions for Community Reflection

- Which IRIS partners already have relationships with organizations in the missing sector?
- Where are referrals or other forms of collaboration already happening between these systems?
- Are there coalitions or shared initiatives that could help strengthen these connections?

4. Identify the Bridges to Build or Strengthen

Where could one stronger connection make a meaningful difference?

Once existing relationships and gaps become more visible, communities can begin to envision the bridges that could create a more connected system of support. A bridge may involve establishing a relationship between organizations, creating a clearer referral pathway, or strengthening coordination between sectors that already serve overlapping populations. The goal is to identify where an intentional connection could improve access to support.

Questions for Community Reflection

- Where do existing referral pathways break down or become unclear?
- What relationships or connections between sectors could be strengthened?
- What would a more coordinated pathway to support look like for individuals and families?
- If our community could strengthen one bridge, where might it make the greatest difference?

BUILDING TOWARD A WHOLE-FAMILY SYSTEM

Recognizing an opportunity is an important first step, but meaningful connections require more than identifying where a gap exists. The goal of this framework is not to expand every part of an IRIS network at once. Sometimes, meaningful progress begins with recognizing one recurring need, identifying a partner who could help address it, or strengthening a relationship that already exists.

As communities consider opportunities for building bridges, a few questions can help move from reflection toward action:

- *Who needs to be involved?* Which organizations, sectors, or local champions could help build the connection?
- *What would make the connection meaningful?* What relationships, shared understanding, or referral processes would need to be established?
- *What is one next step?* What conversation, introduction, or planning opportunity could begin strengthening that bridge?