



The Role of Peer-Learning in IRIS Communities

Contributors:
Mariah Winter

Since 2019, the IRIS Team has provided local IRIS leaders with opportunities to virtually gather in a shared space for peer learning and connection. This shared learning approach offers interactive training and support and is bolstered by the attendees who share and learn from collective experiences. During these gatherings, IRIS leaders share challenges and successes through implementation and cultivation, providing an opportunity to hear from others how they addressed barriers and know they are not alone in managing their IRIS community. This gathering space offers dedicated time for community leaders to share ideas while supporting the IRIS Implementation Team as we seek to better the IRIS implementation approach, tools, and technical assistance provided to our communities.

Currently, there are two peer learning gatherings occurring every quarter: the IRIS Leader Lab and Illinois IRIS Learning Community. IRIS Leader Labs are designed to benefit all local leadership teams, with topics pertinent to all IRIS leaders, regardless of geographic location or the age of the network. However, the Illinois IRIS Learning Community began during the Illinois Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five IRIS Project in 2021, when the need emerged to convene Illinois IRIS Leaders around state-specific programs and topics.

At the most recent Illinois Learning Community in July 2023, Illinois IRIS leaders came together to talk about engaging various sectors in their IRIS networks, with one local leader speaking specifically on their network's medical community involvement. The Sangamon HEART IRIS Network began IRIS Implementation as a part of the IL PDG B-5 IRIS Project, and their local leadership team is comprised primarily of individuals from the medical community. Gwen Walsh, a social worker at the Southern Illinois University School of Medicine Pediatric Clinic and the System and Data Manager of the Sangamon HEART IRIS Network, spoke on their experience using IRIS in their clinic, with hopes of supporting other IRIS Networks in their pursuit of engaging the medical community in their local IRIS networks.

Gwen discussed navigating one of the most common barriers to engaging the medical community: finding the right person within a medical facility to begin conversations about IRIS adoption. While the position can vary from clinic to clinic, she shared that identifying someone with the desire to connect families with resources and who believes in what IRIS could do to support those connections is essential. Fortunately for the Sangamon HEART IRIS Network, many of their local providers were already aware of Sangamon County's needs—they saw a gap in services for their families. The backing from these providers was the support their team needed to work with their organization's legal team and ultimately adopt IRIS in their pediatric clinic.

Gwen also shared how their network has adapted IRIS workflows and configurations to support IRIS use within their clinics, including using their EMR system for providers to create orders for IRIS referrals and positioning the clinic's social workers as the referral navigators.

"IRIS just makes so much sense for providers and nurses to accomplish what we're trying to do when we see families- which is making sure all of their needs are addressed or met, and we can watch them get those services rather than just sending them out of our clinic room and then hoping that they call or follow up. Now, we are still making those connections for families, but we know if they're getting the services instead of waiting until their next well-child visit, which could be 3, 6, or even 12 months from now, and finding out they never got help."

After sharing her experiences, Gwen offered this advice to her peers: "Keep going." While hospitals and medical facilities are large organizations that often take additional time and effort to engage, their involvement in the IRIS network can have a profound impact on families in your community.

Grounded in the experiences of our community members, our IRIS peer learning gatherings hold to our IRIS Values: people first, do and improve, amplify voices, and add seats to the table. During these gatherings, IRIS leaders may share challenges and successes through implementation and cultivation, providing an opportunity to hear from others how they addressed barriers and know they are not alone in this process. If you are an IRIS leader and are interested in learning more about upcoming peer learning opportunities, contact your IRIS Implementation Coordinator.