



Public Health's Role as Community Connector

Public health organizations often see the conditions affecting families' wellness—including food, housing, transportation, and behavioral health needs—and maintain relationships across community organizations responding to those needs. During the [IRIS in Action: Public Health as Trusted Connector for Families](#) session, public health professionals discussed how their roles allowed them to champion a more coordinated system for families to access needed services.

PUBLIC HEALTH AS A TRUSTED CONNECTION POINT

Public health organizations are a trusted entry point into a service network and are positioned to identify cross-sector needs, connect families to vetted resources, and collaborate with partners. Families often turn to public health organizations when they don't know where else to seek help, trusting the health department to guide them toward relevant resources.

Mandi LaRue, a Social Worker with the Johnson County Department of Health and Environment (KS), reflects on the role of public health organizations by highlighting the importance of community trust. She emphasizes that "[public health is] a safety net. The trust the community has [in] public health makes us a really good resource when people don't know where to go...because we're that trusted partner. Individuals believe that the health department has vetted [referral] partners and when we're recommending agencies, they trust that we have...their best interest at heart."

Under the leadership of public health professionals like Mandi, trust is built through reliable support, with organizations focusing on community needs through consistent follow-ups and resource navigation. Trust is generated by being available and ensuring families get access to services when requested. Being positioned to identify and address emerging needs early can help strengthen community confidence in organizations providing support.

ROLE OF COMMUNITY HEALTH WORKERS

Part of the trust public health organizations build comes from the role community health workers play in supporting families. Community health workers operate as the human bridge between families and services. Consistent presence, follow-through, and established relationships help families rely on public health staff for a broad range of needs, making the health department a practical resource for community services.

As a Community Health Worker in Greene County (IL), Amanda McKinley often walks alongside families as they make sense of needs and navigate resources. She identifies the importance of the personal relationships developed through her role, stating, "When you are able to walk alongside your people, your friends, your neighbors, you get them to their goals. I feel like the personal connection community health [workers] offers is...a human element. I'm able to be in the community." Amanda continues with a reiteration on the underlying role of trust: "[We] establish trust through consistency

and showing up for our people. Our neighbors need us, and if we're not consistent, they won't even try to rely on us anymore."

Community health workers play a crucial role in helping families navigate the healthcare system. They leverage their connections with providers and rely on supportive relationships established by health departments. With compassionate community health workers like Amanda, public health extends beyond the walls of the health department by bringing people together and strengthening the conditions for better service coordination.

PUBLIC HEALTH IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

Successful referrals help families feel supported as they navigate complex systems. This is especially meaningful in rural communities, where funding constraints reflect a different reality than larger, urban areas which may have more resources. Navigating a complex web of care is made even more difficult when services are spread over a large geographical region or, worse yet, not provided at all.

Helping families find the care they need falls on public health professionals like Molly Peters, the Public Health Administrator with Greene County Health Department (IL). Molly explains that her department reduces barriers by coordinating across organizations: "If we know that somebody is applying for a service [and] we're able to say, 'We'll send your information...and they will reach out to you,' that takes the barrier away for that individual."

Coordinated referral networks are a tool that can help rural communities better support families; however, they require dedicated staff time, continuing funding, leadership support, and system-level advocacy, particularly for under-resourced rural health departments. It takes the whole community, actively engaged and interested in coordinating care for families, to enact system level change.

IMPORTANCE OF COORDINATED SYSTEMS

Public health organizations are positioned to address needs across programs and sectors, bring partners together around shared challenges, and help communities build more reliable ways of responding. These organizations help to create the conditions for organizations to work together, so families are not left to navigate disconnected systems on their own.

As connectors, they play a vital role in developing shared coordinated processes. One way to build coordinated systems is to implement a shared referral network. IRIS is one such tool that can replace fragmented, person-driven referral navigation with a streamlined method for providers to identify appropriate resources, communicate across organizations, and track whether families receive support.

Kim Peterson, the Director for Community Health at Kane County Health Department (IL), speaks to the role of coordinated systems and the streamlined functionality they can provide. She states how "knowing that you're sending that family with confidence to an organization that can actually serve them and won't turn them away because of their insurance or their income...leads to the success of the family ultimately [getting access to care] and not shutting down the system is too overwhelming."

Coordinated referrals can reduce family burden, distribute demand across available providers, and encourage organizations to address the whole person rather than only the program-specific need

initially identified. Public health can be both a convenor and a champion, but it cannot do so without public health leaders and partners advocating for supportive resources that address community needs.