

Needle-Moving Community Collaboratives

# Case Study: Herkimer County

Collaborating to accelerate social impact

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In 1998, Herkimer County won a planning grant from New York State's Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to establish an integrated county-level planning process. The county took on the grant in an effort to improve the lives of its low-income residents through greater coordination of existing services. The first big planning question was where to focus the group's efforts.

Unlike the extreme poverty seen in urban collaborative success stories, sprawling Herkimer County has high levels of "working poor" dispersed throughout 19 towns, 10 villages and one city with a population of 5,000, Little Falls. Complicating matters, Herkimer County is spread out over 1,412 square miles in a long, thin rectangle, creating significant challenges for service coordination. Nor was largely rural geography the only challenge to planning. Herkimer County was struggling with multiple issues stemming from the low socioeconomic status and underemployment of its population. In particular, the county was facing rising levels of at-risk youth placed in residential facilities, an intervention that experts have shown to be costly and less effective in many cases.

Herkimer County's Integrated County Planning (ICP) teams started by creating a common vision: "to establish an integrated, interagency planning process that promotes the health and well-being of children and families in our community." The team then actively reviewed community level data to develop service priorities. Initially, ICP focused on five risk factors: economic deprivation, family management, family conflict, at-risk youth behaviors and the needs of the birth-to-age-five population. ICP researched best practices and developed comprehensive plans to address service gaps. The leaders of key human

## Fast Facts:

- **Community:** Herkimer County, NY
- **Problem:** Economic hardship and a rising number of youth placed in residential facilities
- **Results:** 54% reduction in number of children in foster care between 2003 and 2011
- **Differentiating Feature:** The Herkimer collaborative brings together more than 50 key stakeholders to improve service coordination in the largely rural county on a monthly basis.
- **Leaders / Lead Organization:** Herkimer Integrated County Planning
- **Philanthropic Support:** NYS Office of Children and Family Services, local funds

and social service delivery entities came together once a month to discuss priority issues, improve coordination, reduce duplication of efforts and make more efficient use of funds. Team members actively reviewed more than 800 community metrics to understand the community's needs. Over time, Herkimer County added bullying and youth violence as priorities in addition to its focus on at-risk youth in general.

One of the collaborative's recent efforts is the Return Home Early Project. It was established in 2008 in response to high out-of-home placement numbers for at-risk youth and tight county budgets. Consistent with best child-welfare practices, the project identifies children in residential facilities who would be better served by intensive community-based services in their homes. The initiative includes Herkimer County's Department of Social Services, Kids Herkimer (a nonprofit providing support to families with at-risk youth) and collaborates with placement facilities, families, family courts, school districts, and community partners. The intent is twofold: to provide services to children and families in their homes and communities (in lieu of expensive residential facilities) and to realize better results. Since 2003, Herkimer County's Persons in Need of Supervision (PINS) program has also addressed youth who are a danger to themselves or others, with a combination of counseling, probation, preventive strategies and family support.

Herkimer County ICP's long-term commitment has paid off. The total number of children in foster care fell from a high of 138 in May 2003 to 64 in August 2011, which is the lowest in-care number recorded in the past 20 years. In parallel, Herkimer County significantly reduced costly juvenile placements in residential facilities through a series of coordinated interventions. Since 2002, the number of PINS youth placed has fallen by 55 percent and residential care days have dropped by 32 percent. This intervention saved the county hundreds of thousands of dollars and realized better outcomes for youth. With an 8 percent recidivism rate for children returning to residential care, the Return Home Early Project produced significantly better results than the national average. It has reduced care-day usage by a stunning 4,430 since 2008, resulting in a cost avoidance of more than \$1.1 million.

One coming challenge for Herkimer County is to further refine its data collection efforts. At the start, Herkimer County set up an extensive data collection effort with the help of Communities That Care, a research institution focused on risk factors that contribute to youth problem behaviors, and with Herkimer County HealthNet, a rural health network funded by the NYS Department of Health. As a result, the collaborative has maintained a formal report that has been updated every three years since 2000. But to add more rigor to its measurement, the team is now utilizing Ready By 21 funding

allocated by the NYS Office of Children and Family Services to formalize its evaluation capabilities and revisit its metrics.

**Two key things have made the Herkimer collaborative successful in increasing the well-being of their county's children:**

**Matching involvement to scope on breadth:** *cross-sector engagement*

The Herkimer Integrated County Planning collaborative regularly brings together more than 50 key stakeholders. Participants range from law enforcement and mental health professionals to school officials and the director of the youth bureau. Given the broad scope of the collaborative, several subgroups have formed: the human development committee, which is focused on children, youth, families and vulnerable adults; an overall steering committee; a youth violence prevention group; and a Best Start planning group, which is focused on the birth-to-five-year-old population. Such taskforces form and disband over time, based on the community's needs.

**Proven impact sustains funding:** *sufficient resources*

Bolstered by its early successes, Herkimer County was able to keep the initiative running after the state grants ran out in 2003. At the start, Herkimer County was one of 15 counties awarded funding for five years at \$65,000 per year from New York State's Office of Children and Family Services. The county used those funds in 1998 to hire Darlene Haman as Herkimer County's strategic planning coordinator. Haman is ICP's sole dedicated staff resource and is responsible for coordinating data collection efforts, facilitating meetings and keeping the collaborative running. Jim Wallace, Herkimer's county administrator, served as ICP's legislative liaison and helped earned the legislature's backing by reporting on the collaborative's significant outcomes and money saved. While other communities had to modify their efforts when funding ran out in 2003, Herkimer County was able to push forward with the support of the legislature and Jim Wallace. County officials have also worked to find scarce county revenues to sustain Integrated County Planning to this day. ICP's proven impact, broad-based legislative support and lean management structure were instrumental in securing these ongoing sources of funding.

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**SOURCES**

- Pasti, Lawrence. "County Reflections." *New York State Office of Children and Family Services*. September 2005. <http://sparkaction.org/node/31415>.
- "Herkimer County Integrated County Planning Project: Final Project Report 1998-2003." *Herkimer County ICP*. 2003.