

Family Resource Centers: A Centerpiece of Illinois Workforce Advantage (IWA)

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What is Illinois Workforce Advantage?

Illinois Workforce Advantage (IWA) is the State of Illinois' new place-based, community development initiative. Its purpose is to organize state agencies so they can work in unison with communities, buttressing their economic, communications and human services infrastructure. IWA focuses on six of the state's most distressed, but resilient localities. It aims to help these communities break through the barriers they face during these times of general prosperity to achieve their aims of becoming good places for parents to raise children.

It will do so by engaging a steering committee of agency leaders in dialogues and negotiations with working groups of community leaders. These state-local deliberations will identify joint strategies for adding value to the most promising community development, human services integration and prevention projects deemed by the communities as high priorities. The support strategies the agencies will consider together will include:

- Establishing new interagency agreements to improve coordination of state-supported services that are already in place;
- Relocating or co-locating state supported services to best support community development strategies and to make services as user-friendly as possible;
- Changing the design or approaches of existing state-supported programs where feasible;
- Tailoring grants already in the pipeline to best support the communities' most promising development strategies;
- Assistance in applying for new private and public funding;
- Directing state discretionary funds where feasible and appropriate to support new community initiatives.

This paper addresses how virtual family resource centers will play an important role in achieving IWA's goals, especially with regard to buttressing the human service infrastructure.

Family Resource Centers

The *family resource center* is a guiding model for IWA's efforts to strengthen the local human services infrastructure, and make service systems into assets for community development. The family resource center is a central place, or a network of electronically linked places, that provide the following amenities to residents of a community:

- Well organized, family-to-family mutual support activities, including opportunities to participate in community improvement projects.
- Generalist case management that enables individuals and families to develop unified personal and family development plans, utilizing all of the various service systems, including employment and training, health, child care, mental health and others.
- Resource rooms with up-to-date computers allowing full use of the internet to access information, job search sites, agency and business web sites, on-line classrooms and other educational resources.
- Culturally competent outreach activities, home visiting services and friendly drop-in sites that build links between the centers and people in their neighborhoods and localities.
- Well planned links to various modes of public transit, and in small communities and neighborhoods, safe, walkable access.
- Conference rooms suitable for cross-disciplinary case planning and family conferences.
- Large rooms suitable for community forums, with capacity for multi-media presentations and multi-site, video-conferences.

Although the approaches, labels and starting points vary, and although they tend to emerge piecemeal, most communities are already building the above features into their local service systems. For example:

- Many **public schools** have increased their before-school and after-school programs. Some have also set up family centers, health clinics, community technology centers, adult education programs, and other services, in effect remodeling themselves into community schools.
- **Community-based, primary health clinics** have sought to become more culturally competent, engaged with community health concerns, and capable of offering a variety of holistic, preventive services for whole families.
- Agencies in the **employment and training** field have adopted the “one-stop” model of service delivery, seeking to co-locate many types of workforce development programs, offer resource rooms and links to education and job search information.
- Traditional **multi-service centers and settlement houses**, long practitioners of one-stop approaches, have offered sites for school-linked projects, primary health services, workforce development programs and child welfare programs that seek to keep families together or help children find new, permanent, health family settings.
- **Some early childhood programs and child care centers** have consciously molded themselves as family resource centers that offer many opportunities for

parent education, as well as parent involvement in governance, child care and community building.

Organizing Unified State Responses to Community Strategies

Because many different funding streams flow through it, the state government is in a unique position to help communities move beyond the piecemeal approaches to building family resource centers. Through Illinois Workforce Advantage, state agencies are now organized to where they can help communities build their human service infrastructure in a more intentional, systematic approach. Through IWA, the state and communities together can address the following questions about their service delivery systems:

1. Across the various settings identified above (schools, clinics, one-stops, agencies and other multi-service centers), what are the community's most promising opportunities for building a family resource center (or a network of digitally linked centers in various sites)?
2. What assets is the community building on to institute these changes?
3. What liabilities is the community facing as it attempts to institute these changes?
4. What state resources are currently being employed to institute these changes?
5. How can current state resources be strategically deployed to help the community build its family resource centers, and in which settings (health, schools, employment training, or others)?
6. How can other state policy changes further support these changes (compatible data systems, integrated funding for community development, training for leadership of family resource centers, and others).