

The Illinois Strengthening Treatment Access and Retention- State Implementation (STAR-SI): State Change Story Keep it Simple, State



The Illinois STAR-SI project consists of a state-level team based at the Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse (IDHS/DASA). DASA plans and manages the addiction treatment system in Illinois with the goal of maximizing accountability, accessibility, and client service outcomes. IDHS/DASA is the largest payer of addiction intervention and treatment services in Illinois and provides funding for a full continuum of substance abuse treatment services.

Statewide, IDHS/DASA funds 140 substance abuse treatment provider agencies, which operate a total of 462 licensed programs at 368 sites.

Theodora Binion Taylor, Director of DASA and Executive Sponsor for the STAR-SI project a NIATx Change Leader Academy (CLA) for the entire DASA staff in September 2008. The NIATx model of process improvement was new to the state; the CLA would provide training and skill development and to secure buy-in from all staff.

At the Academy, participants learn to use essential NIATx tools such as the Nominal Group Technique—a decision-making method that allows a group to brainstorm ideas. By voting on the proposed ideas, a group identifies a key problem to address through NIATx rapid-cycle testing.

“The NGT exercise helped us identify the process of completing a decision memo within DASA as a key area in need of improvement,” says Peggy Alexander, Deputy Director of DASA and state Change Leader for the STAR-SI project. At DASA, a decision memo is an internal document used to make a change in a provider’s contract, either increasing or decreasing funding.

The Illinois Change Leader Academy formed three state-level change teams. Peggy Alexander and her team returned to DASA to do a “walk-through” of the decision memo process.

Adds Kellie Gage, Federal Project Manager at DASA and STAR-SI State Coordinator, “We analyzed the decision memo process from initiation, through submittal and execution, and discovered that it was taking as long as 90 days to get the memo signed off—which in turn could create service delays for the provider who needed additional contract dollars.”

The decision memo change team consisted of nine staff members from the division. They meet every other week from September through November 2008.

The team used another NIATx tool, the fishbone diagram, to isolate the problems that contributed to delays in the decision memo process. Adds Peggy, “We identified three phases in the process—initiation, communication, and process and flow—and found various problems associated with each phase.”

Identifying the core problems helped the team create their first rapid-cycle test:

Plan: develop a staff satisfaction survey on the decision memo process

Do: administer the survey

Study analyze survey results

Act increase staff satisfaction through training

Subsequent rapid-cycle tests included creating a template to guide people on how to complete the decision memo form more quickly; designing a checklist that everyone could use to monitor the process. The final rapid-cycle test in the change project was to offer a two-hour training session at two locations in the state—one in Chicago and another in Springfield—to instruct staff on the process and how to use the newly designed template and checklist.

“Response to the training was positive,” says Peggy. “However, we continue to monitor the decision-memo process for further improvement.”

Adds Kellie, “We know we’re moving in the right direction. The turn-around time now is just under two weeks and one staff member who got an approval so quickly actually thought it was being returned to him for errors rather than because it was approved.”

The state-level team also gave a presentation on the decision memo change project at one of the learning collaboratives. “This really helped the providers understand not only what a decision memo is and how it could affect them, but also what we do at DASA,” explains Peggy.

The DASA team feels that the decision memo change will have a positive impact across the state. Contract changes will be implemented more quickly and providers will be able to execute services more quickly.

The DASA change team understands the rapid-cycle change process much better through this exercise to improve what might seem like an insignificant part of the system. “This was a simple change and it accomplished the change we had hoped for. The team was able to execute to the point of completion and see a result that has a positive impact internally and for our providers.”

Her recommendation for others new to process improvement at the state level?

“The simpler it is the better, especially for a first-time change.”