

Illinois Strengthening Treatment Access and Retention-State Implementation (STAR-SI): Forming a Learning Collaborative

The Illinois Department of Human Services, Division of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse (IDHS/DASA) plans and manages the addiction treatment system in Illinois with the goal of maximizing accountability, accessibility, and client service outcomes. IDHS/DASA licenses all non-hospital based treatment programs, approves certificates of need for Medicaid services, approves grant and Medicaid payments, monitors service delivery, and coordinates substance abuse activities across all other State departments and offices.



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. IDHS/DASA has divided Illinois' 102 counties into 20 service networks for administration, planning and reporting.

The Illinois STAR-SI grant application included ten providers that had already been selected to participate in the partnership: five from the Chicago area, and five from the rural Mount Vernon area, with close proximity to the DASA office in that part of the state. None of the selected providers had any experience with NIATx. The Chicago providers had participated in another project to promote the use of Screening Brief Intervention and Referral to Treatment (SBIRT).

While the STAR-SI state team had planned initially to include all ten providers in the Year 1 Cohort, they chose instead to work with just the five rural providers in Year 1, with the urban providers to join in Year 2.

The state-level team offered a financial incentive to help secure provider buy-in and to acknowledge provider concerns about loss of billable time due to STAR-SI change team work or training. "We offered \$800.00 per month for providers that formed a change team and met at least once each month," says Peggy Alexander, state change team leader for the Illinois project. The state also reimbursed providers for travel to STAR-SI learning sessions and training, which included the NIATx Change Leader Academy.

The project began with a kick-off meeting on October 23, 2006. "Some providers seemed skeptical and had questions about whether the project would really result in changes at the state-level," explains Peggy Alexander, deputy director of DASA and state change leader. "They seemed to have a "wait and see" attitude. But these individuals are now the best advocates for STAR-SI and process improvement."

NIATx coach Steve Gallon, assigned to coach the state's STAR-SI project, attended the kick-off meeting. The providers also had extra support from two peer mentors with broad experience with the NIATx model: Natalie Andrews of Sinnissippi Centers in Dixon, Illinois, and David Moore of Fayette Companies in Peoria. Each cohort for the Illinois project followed a similar training pattern: a kick-off meeting, followed by monthly conference calls and two learning sessions, scheduled at six-month intervals.

"The Year 1 providers shared their experience and lessons with the following cohorts," says Peggy Alexander. "Our Year 3 cohort had the additional benefit of hearing from the Year 2 providers. Peer to peer communication has been a key to the success of our project."

Year 1 providers are still active in Year 3, without financial incentives for the monthly meetings, but they do get reimbursement for training-related travel. Three Year 1 providers attended the NIATx coaching academy and they are now apprentice coaches.

In Years 2 and 3, Peggy added a conference call with Director Binion Taylor and the provider Executive Directors. During this call, Director Binion Taylor spoke on the importance of their roles in the project.

After the kick-off meeting, providers returned to their facilities to conduct a walk-through. Provider response to the walk-through experience was enlightening for all.

"They never expected that they would not be able to schedule an intake because the phone number listed for their agency was incorrect," says Peggy. "They began to recognize that small things could have a huge impact on their ability to deliver quality service. As time went on, they were able to tackle bigger challenges."

As the project gained momentum the DASA team discovered that providers differed in the way they interpreted rules and also in definitions for key terms such as "assessment" and "point of first contact."

Says Kellie, "Our providers were misinterpreting terms based on the DASA definition. For example, some providers considered "point of first contact" as the date of admission while others defined it as the first phone call. Learning about this discrepancy drove our first state-level change project, which resulted in a rule change about the definition of point of initial contact."

Communication has been essential to building and strengthening the Illinois STAR-SI Learning Collaborative. Monthly calls helped the providers and the state team to stay current on STAR-SI related activities. The calls allowed for information sharing and problem solving.

Organizing and recording the calls did pose a challenge. Kellie scheduled and recorded the calls. “We tried various ways to record the calls as a way to get minutes to the providers more quickly. We finally chose to record on audio cassettes, then transcribe the minutes by hand.”

Regular e-mail communication also served to keep the state team, providers, coaches and peer mentors informed. “We began with a weekly e-mail update that we sent out every Friday,” says Peggy. “This is still one of our main ways to share information, but it’s less frequent.”

Coaches and peer mentors provided another level of communication support and technical assistance through site visits and by sitting in on change team meetings. Kellie adds: “The coaches helped a lot with keeping the providers focused on the aim, especially during our monthly calls.”

Adds Peggy, “The providers have told us that they appreciate the increased accessibility to the state office. They know they can call or e-mail anytime and get a quick response.”

The most productive communication, adds Peggy, was through the face-to-face learning sessions. “We tried to do a lot of things over the phone, but face-to-face meetings are the best for trying to launch a common project. We had much better discussions in person than when we were working over the phone. Especially for a change project that is going to affect the state and providers, it’s worth getting everyone in the same room.”

To help build awareness of the NIATx project at DASA, the state team organized a NIATx Change Leader Academy for the entire division, with 75 percent of the staff attending.

“One challenge we faced with the CLA training was in how it was perceived by staff not part of the STAR-SI project,” says Peggy. “We had to make it very clear that the focus is on the process, not the person.” Gradually, however, Peggy and other members of the state STAR-SI team began to see more DASA staff using the PDSA model, as well as volunteering ideas for change projects.

The Illinois Alcoholism and Drug Dependence Association (IADDA) helped to build the STAR-SI Learning Collaborative starting in Year 2. IADDA invited all of their member provider organizations to enroll in the NIATx-sponsored ACTION (Adopting Changes to Improve Outcomes Now) Campaign.

The Illinois STAR-SI team worked with providers on a common change project to reducing waiting time between first contact to first assessment. After clarifying the requirement with the staff at the national program office, this common change project was repeated with Year 2 and Year 3 providers.

Peggy's advise to another state or system about to begin a process improvement learning collaborative? "Start with something simple. You win buy-in when your group sees that something has changed and that their efforts have made a difference."

Peggy also stresses the importance of clear, consistent communication at all levels.

"We've learned a lot about ways to strengthen our communication internally and externally through the STAR-SI project."