

Integrating the Human Service System
In New York State:
Final Evaluation of the
Integrated County Planning Initiative

Executive Summary

May 2005

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Introduction

This report is a culmination of five years of evaluating the implementation of the Integrated County Planning (ICP) initiative, a multi-county demonstration project designed to coordinate planning within the human service delivery system across New York State. At the State level, ICP is funded and administered by the Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) but also involves the partnership of a number of State agencies – Office of Mental Health, Council on Children and Families, Division of Probation and Correctional Alternatives, Department of Health, Education Department, Office on Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, and the Office of Alcoholism and Substance Abuse Services. At the local level, ICP supported 16 counties with five-year grants of \$65,000 annually, New York City with a five year grant of \$200,000 annually, and an additional 15 counties with one-year grants of \$10,000.

The overall goal of ICP is to improve outcomes for children, youth and families by integrating planning around seven key concepts:

- Locally controlled interagency planning coordination
- Stakeholder involvement
- Human development continuum approach
- Community asset building
- Outcome based orientation
- Family-centered perspective
- Resource allocation prioritization

The original RFP offered the Chief Executive Officer of each county funding to experiment with the development of a coordinated, more comprehensive planning process for human services. The local experience was intended to provide OCFS with useful input for designing new planning requirements and more flexible funding mechanisms.

Description of the Evaluation

The evaluation was conducted by the Center for Human Services Research of the University at Albany. Data collection and analysis focused on implementation processes and the achievement of intermediate goals related to county planning. The evaluation is intended to inform future efforts to integrate planning by presenting model practices and the lessons learned.

The research team used a multi-faceted approach that involved a combination of data collection methods including document review, surveying, in-depth interviews, focus groups, and observation.

Findings

County Accomplishments and Challenges

ICP counties had many accomplishments. They all organized core coordinating teams with a broad cross section of membership. Overall, the team members felt they were effective in developing a shared vision and advancing local planning in their counties. Their effectiveness was partially attributed to the strong leadership of ICP Coordinators. While counties grappled with sustaining community involvement in ICP, they were creative in their efforts to inform and engage local stakeholders. ICP counties had particular success in developing sophisticated needs assessments, a critical first step in integrating county planning. ICP also fostered efficient county administrative practices such as cross-system resource inventories, common grant applications, and cross departmental spending reviews. Commitment to integrated planning is indicated at the local level. Since the conclusion of the evaluation in Fall 2004, the evaluation team has learned that many ICP counties have used local resources to continue integrated planning in various capacities, indicating a continuing commitment to ICP principles.

State Level Accomplishments and Challenges

State ICP leaders exerted a lot of effort to promote ICP. Regional forums were convened, a statewide ICP listserv was created, and periodic trainings and networking conferences were conducted. Counties rated these efforts and the leadership provided by the State Project Coordinator very positively. More effort, however, needs to be devoted to strengthening the interagency group, developing the internal workgroup, establishing meaningful plan document requirements with an integrated review process, and clarifying the role of regional offices.

Conceptual Issues

Broadly speaking, ICP had two basic goals: (1) to promote collaborative, interagency county planning and (2) to merge the planning requirements and resulting local planning documents of OCFS. While ICP ultimately resulted in broad accomplishments on a county level, there were a number of unresolved conceptual issues. These included specifying the role of State planning documents in relation to county level planning, providing a clear definition of target populations, balancing State leadership with local control, and involving a broad spectrum of local stakeholders with sustained commitment to community planning.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

This section offers a series of recommendations and provides a set of ingredients for successful collaboration that was a result of the data collection over five years.

Political Support

The literature suggests that involving political leaders and persons controlling resources are factors in successful collaboratives (Harbin et al., 1991; Kagen & Neville, 1993). In 2004, state legislation was passed that authorizes a combined plan (formerly the Consolidated Services Plan and County Comprehensive Plan) by 2008, an indication of executive and legislative support for the initiative. At the county level, when the Chief Elected Official was involved in ICP, county agency representatives felt more compelled to be active and to show a stronger level of commitment.

Strong Team Structure

Researchers identify a strong interagency structure as an ingredient for successful integration (Kahn & Kammerman, 1992; Agranoff, 1985). Teams that we evaluated from other states, including Georgia, Vermont, West Virginia, and Indiana, were comprised of leaders of the member agencies at the commissioner or director levels. The involvement of commissioners and directors from State agencies outside of OCFS on the ICP Interagency Steering Committee was minimal. With strong leadership, the Interagency Steering Committee has great potential to influence integrated planning at the county level. On the county level, the ICP steering committees were generally comprised of commissioners or upper level management.

Data and Needs Assessments

Developing outcome measures and data indicators is a crucial first step in county planning. Uniform goals and objectives for all counties, such as the New York State Touchstones data system, would allow for the sharing of information among the localities and provide an opportunity to identify strengths and weaknesses across the State. In conducting needs assessments, counties should initially rely on published data sources before collecting new data. Many surveys cannot and should not be viewed as the only means to conduct a needs assessment. Counties should consider hiring or assigning a data specialist to maintain, update, and interpret data.

Leadership and Project Coordination

Research points out that lack of leadership is a primary reason for failure in many integration efforts (Yessian, 1995; O'Looney, 1997). In general, the State Project Coordinators as well as county coordinators received very positive ratings from their respective teams. County teams attributed strong leadership to much of the success they experienced.

The interviews and the literature discuss several factors that are linked to successful leadership. First, sufficient resources needs to be devoted to getting coordinated planning started. Whether the coordinator is an independent contractor or a county employee, a point-person is an important factor in the success of a collaborative initiative such as ICP. It is also important to hire a leader who is viewed as neutral, i.e., someone who is not tied to any of the partners.

Communication

Open and frequent communication is vital to the success of integration at every level (Mattessich & Monsey, 1992). New York State has developed a good communication system among ICP counties, which should go even further. Other states that we studied had well developed methods for State and county communication. These included web pages that provided such information as meetings and events relevant to the collaborative efforts, local on-line access to data to measure goals and objectives, and electronic newsletters. Many states also had established formal structures to meet the training and technical assistance needs of the counties. The Office of Children and Family Services organized several successful statewide meetings of the ICP counties that can be continued.

Integrating ICP: Regional Offices and Other Collaboratives

Integrating the regional offices into the team is also essential to the effective communication with counties and implementation of the initiative at the local level. The role of regional offices was not consistent throughout the life of this project.

ICP is but one of many collaborative efforts. The same people who sit at the ICP planning table also sit at many other tables. The ICP interagency structure should analyze the collaborative groups operating in the counties, their purposes and activities, and the possibility for partnership or consolidation.

State Planning Documents

All parties affiliated with ICP, both at the county and state levels, agreed that the OCFS plan review process was in need of improvement. On a broader level, the Interagency Steering Committee might consider establishing the same deadline for the submission of county plans across state agencies. Having some plans due at the same time would enable counties to save resources by coordinating public hearings across systems, where appropriate, and streamlining the needs assessment process. As a result, the needs assessment process would be more coordinated and needs assessment reports would be more comprehensive, addressing the overlapping needs of the county population as a whole.