



Indiana—Building Bridges Between Programs to Enroll Eligible Children and Families

The Problem

Every day, thousands of Indiana schoolchildren enjoy a free or reduced-price lunch—a federal benefit for low-income families. Many of those children are likely eligible for government-funded public health insurance as well, but lack of coordination between state agencies dealing with public benefits prevented the programs from sharing information with each other.

The Indiana Family and Social Services Administration handles eligibility determinations for Medicaid and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP), as well as for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). The state Department of Education administers the national school lunch program. Each of the state agencies has its own mission and its own set of legislative mandates to implement.

Indiana *Covering Kids & Families* set as one of its early goals to stimulate conversation and collaboration between the two agencies. “They can reach their own existing departmental goals but also get outside of the mandated boxes and build bridges with other agencies to better serve children who are eligible for more than one program,” said David Roos, director of Indiana *Covering Kids & Families* (CKF).

Legislation Opens the Door

One such opportunity came in a provision in the 2000 federal bill that allowed for the sharing of information between four federal programs: free or reduced-priced school lunches, the Women Infants and Children (WIC) nutrition program, Medicaid and CHIP. The goal was to simplify the way in which families apply for an array of means-tested programs.

Inspired in 2002 by the federal changes, Indiana *Covering Kids & Families* asked Indiana's Family and Social Services Administration and Department of Education to encourage the state's school corporations to share information between the school lunch program and Medicaid and CHIP to determine the number of eligible and unenrolled kids receiving free or reduced-price school lunch. Matching data proved challenging as data are collected and processed differently among schools.

“It made it difficult for us at CKF to work in a uniform fashion with those school corporations,” Roos said, “because one was doing it one way, another doing it another way, a lot were still doing it manually.”

There also were concerns about how to protect confidential information. Despite a concerted effort to build bridges between agencies, “it was more like a wooden bridge than a highway thoroughfare,” said Roos.

A New Incentive

Additional federal legislation provided new opportunities for the two agencies to collaborate. In 2004, Congress mandated that all schools in the country adopt direct certification for the National School Lunch Program by the 2008 school year, which required school districts to verify household eligibility for the program. “This changed the rules of the game,” Roos said. “The new legislation promised that, across time, fewer and fewer would be using paper applications and more and more would be going through direct certification...and that there was going to be a streamlined, computerized process.”

“[The new legislation] created a very different incentive for us,” Roos said, “and for many other states to say, ‘Okay, if they are going to make this change with direct certification, how do we position ourselves to take advantage of it?’”

Indiana was ahead of the curve in responding to the new mandates because it had already developed a computerized system to cross-match students eligible for the lunch program with other means-tested programs. The new certification mandate meant that the Department of Education could develop its system further and deploy it more widely.

“Government agencies don’t share data real well,” said John Todd, assistant director of the school and community nutrition division of the Indiana Department of Education. “They really don’t. What better reason than to give help to families who desperately need it? ... All of these ways we share data and match names in both directions benefits the children and also makes the agencies work far more efficiently. There’s no point in recollecting data that’s already been collected by somebody else.”

Express Lane Eligibility

The drive continues to find better ways to share information between public benefits programs. At the national level, language in the 2009 CHIP reauthorization encourages and provides incentives for states to use “express-lane eligibility,” championed by Indiana’s Senator Richard Lugar and others. Employing the strategy of express-lane eligibility will continue the trend towards allowing states to share appropriate data about family composition and income between an array of means-tested and other programs.

Indiana *Covering Kids & Families* has encouraged the state agencies to pursue express-lane eligibility and the agencies have said they are committed to doing so. It has taken a long time, but that wooden bridge may yet become the speedy thoroughfare that Indiana *Covering Kids & Families* dreamed of.

“In Indiana, school partnerships are critical to identify and enroll children in Medicaid and CHIP,” Roos said. “What we had to do was learn a lot of new regulations about agencies we were previously unfamiliar with. Then we could say, ‘How can we do this better, simpler, in a more user-friendly fashion and identify win-win strategies that benefit all the agencies and the families whom we are serving?’”