

Spotlight on La Crosse County Systems Project

In August 2009, La Crosse County launched an initiative to improve substance abuse treatment county-wide. La Crosse County observed that individual agencies had used the NIATx model to improve access to and retention in treatment, and wondered if they could apply it to the county drug and alcohol delivery system. Their goal was to provide process improvement training to the five largest providers in the La Crosse area, pilot a county change team, and ultimately build the NIATx model into all of their contracts with providers. Since the project launched, La Crosse County and five treatment agencies have worked as a team to successfully improve the client referral process and open access to treatment.

In order to launch the system initiative, La Crosse County and STAR-SI co-sponsored a NIATx training. Attending providers included, Gundersen Lutheran, Franciscan Skemp, Coulee Youth Center, Coulee Council on Addiction, and Hoffe Counseling (now Hiawatha Valley Mental Health Center). Providers were trained on how to implement the NIATx model within their individual agencies and also how to extend the model to a systems perspective. The county chose the aim of improving access and all then providers participated in the systems project by participating in teleconferences offered in September, October and November following the training. The combination of having agencies implement change projects within their own agencies and at the systems level led to very successful outcomes; for example, Franciscan Skemp decreased their no-show rate from 35% to 8% by offering on-demand intakes! At the end of the three months, participants voted to continue working as a systems change team and to continue with the monthly teleconferences.

As a team, La Crosse County and the five treatment agencies have addressed barriers and processes at the system-level. Open communication between county employees and provider agencies have enabled the team to examine barriers that hamper efficient and effective treatment county-wide. Change projects have included improving the timeliness of the Level of Care Summaries and improving 211 crisis call referrals. In June, Hiawatha Valley Mental Health Center and Coulee Council began regularly notifying the County of open appointment slots. That month, La Crosse County was able to make 4 same-day referrals to Hiawatha! In addition, La Crosse County has reduced wait time for clients from 15 days in July 2010 to just 4 in September! By addressing these types of processes, the La Crosse County System Change Team is helping the county better utilize resources, making it easier for providers to treat people, and improving services for clients.

The systems-level project has been so successful that La Crosse County has decided to proceed with their goal of building the NIATx model into all of their contracts with providers starting in calendar year 2011. Their goal is to encourage agencies to use tools such as walk-throughs and rapid cycle testing to continuously enhance their businesses processes and improve treatment for La Crosse County residents. As each agency works on the NIATx goals, such as reducing waiting time to treatment and increasing the number of clients who continue through four treatment sessions, the number of people throughout the La Crosse area who are able to access and successfully complete treatment increases. By initiating system change, La Crosse County is contributing to a healthier community.