



Research Report

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# An Assessment of Help Me Grow Western New York's Progress Toward Strengthening Early Childhood Systems



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# About This Report

Healthy child development is a key driver for better health and well-being throughout a person's life, and the early years set that important foundation. Monitoring progress in early childhood development can help ensure that cognitive, social, behavioral, and physical development are on track.

Early intervention programs play a critical role in mitigating risks to development. Increasingly, there is recognition that early intervention requires more than discrete programmatic solutions but rather a full system transformation, such as through the national Help Me Grow initiative. Help Me Grow Western New York (HMG WNY), a regional effort, aims to build and strengthen a comprehensive and coordinated system of early childhood development and care to support the development and well-being of children in this region. HMG WNY serves eight counties in New York state. In 2021, HMG WNY refocused its orientation on a system-building approach in which it acts as a regional catalyst to form a shared agenda and action plan that strengthens community resources and deploys collective power to advocate for children. In this report, we assess how HMG WNY is meeting this objective of coordination and provision of early childhood services.

This research was funded by the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation. The report should be of interest to various policymakers and practitioners in child development and in child and family systems.

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# Summary

Monitoring progress in early childhood development can help ensure that a child’s cognitive, social, behavioral, and physical development are on track and guide interventions if they are not. Because early childhood development has a large influence on healthy lifespan development, such interventions can have effects for decades.

One effort to transform child-serving systems is the Help Me Grow (HMG) initiative, which is both national and state-based. Help Me Grow Western New York (HMG WNY), a regional effort, aims to build and strengthen a comprehensive and coordinated system of early childhood development and care to support the development and well-being of children in this region. HMG WNY serves eight counties in New York state and collaborates with early childhood centers, school districts, medical providers, and community-based organizations on early childhood developmental screenings and monitoring.

In 2021, HMG WNY refocused its orientation to operate as a system-builder in the region and to serve as a catalyst for creating a unified vision and data-driven action plan. By leveraging the collective strength of the early childhood system, HMG WNY also advocates for necessary policy changes. HMG WNY’s strategic approach focuses on the following four system-building goals (HMG WNY, 2021):

1. Support “action tables” working collaboratively to build a seamless system of supports responding to the needs of young children and families.
2. Supply data to inform action and measure progress.
3. Identify and collectively address gaps in resources and supports to ensure a well-functioning and responsive system of care and support.
4. Engage in policy advocacy for long-term sustainability of the system.

In this report, we review the efforts of HMG WNY since adopting these system-building goals in 2021. We document the progress that HMG WNY has made in such areas as building the early childhood network of system partners, addressing gaps in resources, and advocating for policy change.

## Issue

In this report, we assess how HMG WNY addresses the local need for better coordination and provision of early childhood services. The eight counties of western New York form a diverse community whose socioeconomic composition varies but which all share at least some level of need for better coordination and provision of early childhood services. We focus on how HMG WNY is working to strengthen and expand the early childhood system of western New York. In doing so, we provide insights that will inform the next steps for HMG WNY.

## Approach

We used a mixed methods evaluation that drew on multiple data sources. Our data sources included documents on HMG WNY's implementation; interviews with HMG WNY staff, key partners, and policymakers to understand implementation activities, as well as progress, challenges, and successes; and a network survey of organizations in the early childhood network convened by HMG WNY to understand what new connections have been made, how strong the relationships in the network are, what changes at the organization and system levels are happening as a result of network involvement, and what the facilitators and barriers to network involvement are.

## Key Findings

HMG WNY's network includes partners from a variety of sectors, including early education and child care, local and county government, family or human services, mental or behavioral health, and K-12 education. The network partners are concentrated in the more populous counties of Erie and Niagara but also have representation in the rural counties in the region. Since 2021, HMG WNY has focused on strengthening and expanding its network to develop a coordinated early childhood development and care system that is aimed at improving child development and well-being. The key efforts for each system-building goal are provided in the following sections.

### Building the Early Childhood Network of System Partners

- HMG WNY's work to form or strengthen partnerships has effectively facilitated the development of a coordinated early childhood system that is responsive to the needs of young children and families.
- Key achievements include enhancing partner knowledge, increasing community engagement, broadening partner diversity, establishing strategic rural partnerships, and efficiently coordinating resources to prevent service duplication.
- According to the network partners whom we interviewed, HMG WNY's "footprint in the community has stretched" and its "passionate people recruit passionate partners." Additionally, according to our discussions with network partners, HMG WNY is "showing up more in the community," "is more public facing and oriented toward community awareness," and "has a more regional flair."

### Addressing Gaps in Resources

- HMG WNY has improved the network's capability to identify and address gaps in resources and supports, which demonstrates the value of a flexible and responsive early childhood care system.

- Progress includes developing strategies for early childhood developmental screenings, building provider capacities, expanding access to screenings, and establishing a Centralized Access Point (CAP) to streamline access to resources.
- Despite HMG WNY's success in increasing early childhood screenings, partners knew relatively little about the CAP and emphasized the need for better communication and understanding of its operation and usage.

## Supporting Network Partners with Data

- HMG WNY's implementation of a data dashboard has been pivotal in enabling providers to use data effectively and enhancing the accuracy and timeliness of developmental screenings and referrals.
- Progress includes establishing data-sharing agreements, producing county-level data profiles, and facilitating the use of data for outreach and advocacy by network partners.
- System partners recognized the utility of the data dashboard and its high quality. At the same time, some noted a need for training to use the dashboard and the challenges posed by duplication of records between the HMG WNY dashboard and other data collection efforts.

## Advocating for Policy Change

- HMG WNY has sought to leverage data and other pertinent information to advocate for increased investments in early childhood programs. In one such effort, HMG WNY successfully collaborated with early childhood system partners to advocate for a significant increase in the state-level HMG budget.
- HMG WNY efforts have resulted in relationships with more than a dozen regional or state-level entities that span different sectors, including early childhood education and social services.
- Partners recognized the success of HMG WNY in meeting its system-building goals.

## Strength of the Early Childhood Network

- Nearly all organizations in the early childhood network reported relationships with each other. Organizations with the most connections to others were primarily those that worked across the region. Organizations working in a county tended to report connections in that county or adjacent ones.
- Relationships were primarily built through active participation in various coalitions and committees. The most frequently cited results of these relationships were an exchange of resources and improved services or supports for young children and families.

- Partners in the network perceived high value from their connections, and most partners rated the network highly for power and influence, level of involvement, and resource contributions. Organizations also rated their partners highly for their reliability, mission alignment, and openness to discussion.
- Among the successes that partners noted were improving knowledge and awareness of early childhood issues and community resources across sectors; increasing focus on physical, social-emotional, and mental health issues for young children; increasing collaboration among partners across sectors; and developing effective strategies to support high-quality, accessible services to support young children and their families. The most important outcomes that partners identified were guiding the early childhood network of system partners and addressing gaps in resources and supports.
- The most prominent challenges in the network are funding, addressing leadership or staff turnover, and effectively bringing groups together.

Overall, these learnings underline the effectiveness of HMG WNY's approach in building a robust early childhood development and care system.

## Opportunities

HMG WNY has been successful in building a strong early childhood network of system providers, addressing gaps in resources, supporting network partners with data, and advocating for policy change. At the same time, there are opportunities for continued growth or improvement, including the following:

- **Partnership development and engagement.** More-robust communication strategies might help ensure that all partners are better informed and engaged in the network's activities and goals. Communications should focus on system-building activities that are clear and targeted.
- **Developmental screenings.** HMG WNY should continue efforts to increase the number of screening partners and ensure consistent access to screenings for young children and their families.
- **Data capabilities.** Further development of data capabilities can enhance the ability to monitor, evaluate, and respond to the needs of the early childhood network's partners. HMG WNY should also increase awareness and engagement with data among all partners, such as by providing training on using the data dashboard.
- **Advocacy efforts.** HMG WNY should expand its relationships with policymakers and leverage data to support advocacy efforts for increased public investments in early childhood programs. It should also intensify efforts to familiarize partners with ongoing advocacy work.
- **Early childhood network strength.** Our network survey serves as a baseline for measuring the strength of the early childhood network system of partners. Observing the



evolution of the network over time will require an annual administration of the survey. HMG WNY could also convene members to increase the number and strength of relationships in the network, facilitate partnerships among members in different counties, and evaluate the contributions of members in maintaining high levels of trust and value in the network.



# Contents

<b>About This Report</b> .....	iii
<b>Summary</b> .....	v
<b>Figures and Tables</b> .....	xiii
<b>CHAPTER 1</b>	
<b>Introduction</b> .....	1
Background and Context .....	1
A National System of Care Model .....	2
Strengthening the Early Childhood Care System in Western New York.....	3
Children and Families in Western New York.....	5
Organization of This Report .....	6
<b>CHAPTER 2</b>	
<b>Evaluation Approach</b> .....	7
Data Sources and Analysis.....	7
<b>CHAPTER 3</b>	
<b>Help Me Grow Western New York</b> .....	13
Structure .....	13
Partners’ Perceptions of Help Me Grow Western New York.....	16
<b>CHAPTER 4</b>	
<b>Western New York’s Early Childhood Network</b> .....	19
Who Are the Partners in the Early Childhood Network?.....	19
How Do Partners Contribute to the Early Childhood Network?.....	22
How Do Partners Perceive the Early Childhood Network?.....	23
How Are Partnerships Built in the Early Childhood Network?.....	25
How Strong Is the Early Childhood Network?.....	28
Perceived Value of the Early Childhood Network.....	31
Trust in the Early Childhood Network .....	32
<b>CHAPTER 5</b>	
<b>Progress Toward Help Me Grow Western New York’s System-Building Goals</b> .....	35
Building the Early Childhood Network of System Partners .....	35
Addressing Gaps in Resources and Supports .....	38
Supporting Network Partners with Data .....	41
Advocating for Policy Change.....	42
What Progress Has Help Me Grow Western New York Made to Build the Early Childhood Network? .....	43

**CHAPTER 6**

**Learnings and Opportunities**..... 47  
    Key Findings and Insights ..... 47  
    Opportunities..... 50

**APPENDIX**

**Network Maps by Service Area** ..... 53

**References** ..... 61

# Figures and Tables

## Figures

1.1.	Counties in the Help Me Grow Western New York Network.....	4
3.1.	Systems Change Processes for the Four System-Building Components of Help Me Grow Western New York .....	14
4.1.	Types of Organizations in the Early Childhood Network .....	20
4.2.	How Relationships Were Developed in the Early Childhood Network .....	26
4.3.	Types of Activities to Maintain Early Childhood Network Relationships.....	28
4.4.	Results of Relationships Among Early Childhood Network Members.....	29
4.5.	Density of the Early Childhood Network .....	30
4.6.	Value of the Early Childhood Network.....	32
4.7.	Trust Among the Early Childhood Network.....	33
5.1.	System Partners’ Perspectives on Help Me Grow Western New York’s Growth ...	36
5.2.	Average Developmental Screenings per Month in Eight-County Area .....	39
5.3.	Degree of Network’s Success in Reaching Its Goals .....	46
A.1.	Allegany County Network Map .....	54
A.2.	Erie County Network Map .....	55
A.3.	Genesee County Network Map .....	56
A.4.	Niagara County Network Map.....	57
A.5.	Orleans County Network Map.....	58
A.6.	Wyoming County Network Map .....	59

## Tables

1.1.	Race and Ethnicity of Newborns, by Help Me Grow Western New York County in 2021.....	5
2.1.	Response Rates, by Primary Service Area .....	10
2.2.	PARTNER Social Network Analysis Measures .....	11
4.1.	Type of Organization, by Service Area .....	20
4.2.	Sectors Represented in the Early Childhood Network .....	21
4.3.	Sectors Represented in the Early Childhood Network, by Service Area .....	21
4.4.	Partner Contributions to the Early Childhood Network.....	22
4.5.	Improvements Attributed to Early Childhood Network .....	24
4.6.	Challenges with Participation in the Early Childhood Network.....	24
4.7.	Number of Connections in and Across Service Areas .....	31
5.1.	Early Childhood System’s Progress and Key Outcomes.....	44



# Introduction

## Background and Context

Healthy child development is a cumulative process. Infancy and early childhood are critical periods in which experiences might disproportionately affect development, health, and well-being later in life (Anderson et al., 2003; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan, and Maritato, 1997; Currie, 2005; Karoly, Kilburn, and Cannon, 2005). Developmental monitoring allows families and caregivers to see how children are progressing and to support children in meeting their developmental milestones on schedule. A developmental screening is a formal process that uses instruments (e.g., checklists, questionnaires) to assess and monitor cognitive, social, behavioral, and physical development. Early signals of developmental concern enable early intervention, or the provision of specialized supports, to get development back on track. Early childhood development programs are designed to mitigate the factors that place children at risk of poor outcomes (Drukker et al., 2003; Hertzman, 2000; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000). The earlier that children receive the tailored help they need, the more likely they are to improve their developmental trajectories before entry to kindergarten, which reduces the need for more-intensive services at school or later in life (Bruder, 2010; Karoly, Kilburn, and Cannon, 2005).

A variety of settings is involved in early childhood screening and interventions. Health- and child-care settings typically implement these screenings because providers in these settings regularly interact with children under age 5. Policies for these settings also support the use of universal screening programs. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends development screenings during well-child visits starting at nine months and continuing until age 5 (Lipkin, Macias, and Council on Children with Disabilities, Section on Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrics, 2020). Additionally, the federally mandated Child Find program requires states to screen young children and provide interventions to support their development, and these efforts are usually coordinated through K–12 school districts (Pub. L. 101-476, 1990, Part B, Section 300.11). Federally funded early childhood programs, such as Head Start, must also conduct developmental monitoring and screening (Code of Federal Regulations, Title 45, Part 1302). If these screenings reveal any concerns, families are referred to interventionists, who might come from government agencies, private organizations, nonprofits, or community-based organizations. Because there is a wide variety of settings and sectors involved in the early childhood system, the network of partners that is involved in screenings and providing early

childhood development programs and services is quite complex. This fragmentation makes it challenging for families to navigate the available services. Furthermore, despite existing recommendations and regulations regarding developmental screenings, their implementation is not widespread.

To improve outcomes for children and their families, there is growing emphasis on creating a robust early childhood system (Bruner et al., 2004; Gallagher and Clifford, 2000; Hebbeler, Spiker, and Kahn, 2012). An *early childhood system* is a comprehensive network of services and supports that is aimed at promoting the healthy development of young children from birth to kindergarten. These systems are designed to ensure that children have access to the essential health, education, and family support services that foster their physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Building strong early childhood systems requires collaboration among various partners, including government agencies, private organizations, nonprofits, and communities. It also involves coordination across various sectors, such as early learning, health care, education, and housing (Early Childhood Systems Working Group, 2014; O'Connor and Cohen, 2021; Yoshikawa, Rosman, and Hsueh, 2002). Transforming early childhood systems has been a key focus for some time, especially through federal initiatives, such as the National Institute for Children's Health Quality, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services–led Child Care Technical Assistance Network, and the larger Help Me Grow (HMG) initiative, which we will describe more. Early childhood coalitions have played a crucial role in these systemic changes. These coalitions embody the principles of collective impact by bridging the often disconnected focuses on child well-being and fostering coordination through joint action and advocacy (National Institute for Children's Health Quality, undated). Furthermore, strengthening the network of child-serving organizations helps clarify common objectives and improve data-sharing (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Child Care Technical Assistance Network, 2024). Some efforts to transform early childhood systems have concentrated on building the capacity of organizations in the network to better serve entire families in ways that are tailored and culturally responsive (Franklin, 2016).

## A National System of Care Model

HMG is a system-level model that leverages and augments existing resources to advance early childhood system development in communities. The HMG approach has four interrelated core components:

- A **Centralized Access Point** assists families and professionals in connecting children to the grid of community resources that help them thrive.
- **Family & Community Outreach** builds parent and provider understanding of healthy child development, supportive services available to families in the community, and how both are important to improving children's outcomes.



- When potential concerns are spotted early on, they can be easier to address. **Child Health Care Provider Outreach** supports early detection and intervention efforts and connects medical providers to the grid of community resources to best support families.
- To make sure the resource grid is working effectively, **Data Collection & Analysis** supports evaluation, helps identify systemic gaps, bolsters advocacy efforts, and guides quality improvement. (Help Me Grow National Center, undated)

The HMG model has three structural requirements: (1) a lead agency to form a governing body and provide administrative and fiscal support, (2) a network of partners with a shared vision regarding the importance of a robust early childhood development system and strategies for growing the network, and (3) a quality improvement orientation to achieve outcomes over time.

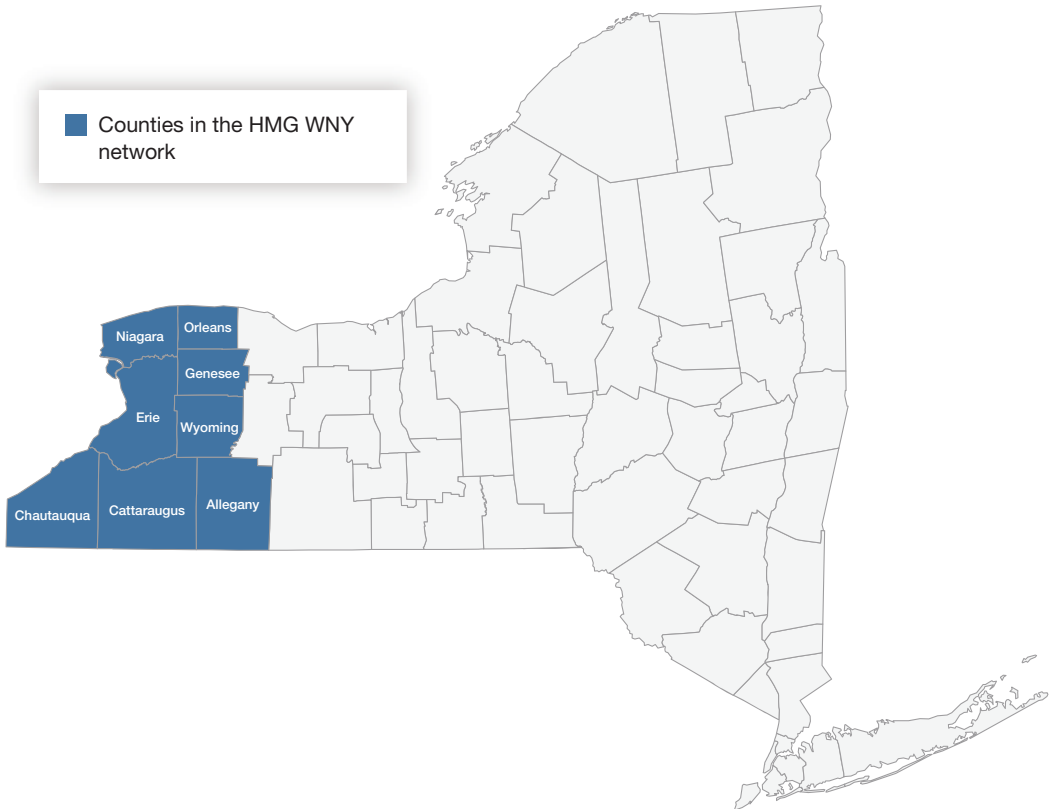
HMG has been present in communities in New York state since 2011 and became part of the national network in 2017 as HMG New York State. Presently, HMG New York State includes five affiliates: Long Island, Onondaga, Finger Lakes, Western New York, and Oswego. The goals of HMG New York State expand on the national model with system-building goals that are focused on universal access to developmental screenings, consistent support for families seeking services, the advancement of parents' knowledge about child development and advocacy skills, and a more streamlined and effective early childhood system of supports (Help Me Grow New York State, 2024).

## Strengthening the Early Childhood Care System in Western New York

Help Me Grow Western New York (HMG WNY) aims to build and strengthen a comprehensive and coordinated system of early childhood development and care to support the development and well-being of children in this region. HMG WNY was established in 2011 as the inaugural HMG affiliate in New York state and was one of the first HMG affiliates in the United States. After initially focusing on Erie and Niagara Counties, HMG WNY has expanded to include Allegany, Cattaraugus, Chautauqua, Genesee, Orleans, and Wyoming Counties (see Figure 1.1).

Since its inception, HMG WNY has focused on supporting developmental screening and monitoring; successfully promoted and leveraged mandatory screening requirements; and built collaborative relationships with educators, providers, and child health-care professionals to administer developmental screenings. Even with this narrow focus, HMG WNY faced challenges with this work partly because of the complexity of implementing the four components of the national HMG model described above, which are influenced by local and regional factors in New York state and decisions about HMG WNY's structure and growth. As a result, HMG WNY engaged in a strategic planning process in 2021 that was grounded in the principles of system-building. These principles aim to understand needs and assets,

**FIGURE 1.1**  
**Counties in the Help Me Grow Western New York Network**



engage multiple actors, comprehend the system, collaborate with others, distribute leadership, and foster a learning culture.

The vision of HMG WNY that emerged from the strategic planning process moved beyond a focus on developmental screening and tracking to a multipronged approach to ensure that “children in all counties of our region will have positive experiences during their critical first five years of life that enable them to be healthy, resilient, and prepared to achieve their potential” (HMG WNY, undated). This approach took account of the successes and challenges of HMG WNY’s prior work and was grounded in a set of activities to achieve four system-building goals (HMG WNY, 2021):

1. Support “action tables” working collaboratively to build a seamless system of supports responding to the needs of young children and families.
2. Supply data to inform action and measure progress.

3. Identify and collectively address gaps in resources and supports to ensure a well-functioning and responsive system of care and support.
4. Engage in policy advocacy for long-term sustainability of the system.

Overall, HMG WNY aims to serve as a regional catalyst in forming a shared agenda and action plan that strengthens community resources and deploys collective power to advocate for young children.

## Children and Families in Western New York

U.S. Census Bureau (2023) estimates that there were 304,890 children in the HMG WNY service area in 2021. Of these, 78,799 were younger than age 5, which represented 26 percent of the total child population. The 2021 poverty rate for children ages 0 to 17 across this area was 19 percent and varied from 12 to 23 percent by county (Council on Children & Families, Kids' Well-Being Indicators Clearinghouse, undated). As shown in Table 1.1, 15,339 children were born in this area in 2021, of whom 31 percent were non-White children (New York State Department of Health, 2024). Children born in the primarily urban counties of Erie and Niagara were more likely to be non-White (36 percent) than those born in the other, more-rural counties (17 percent).

**TABLE 1.1**  
**Race and Ethnicity of Newborns, by Help Me Grow Western New York County in 2021**

County	Number of Newborns				Total
	White	Black	Hispanic	Other	
Allegany	467	0	23	8	498
Cattaraugus	622	7	98	65	793
Chautauqua	960	21	220	49	1,253
Erie	5,816	1,717	763	1,217	9,516
Genesee	453	16	34	36	539
Niagara	1,538	183	105	160	1,986
Orleans	352	8	22	14	396
Wyoming	346	1	5	6	358
Total	10,554	1,953	1,270	1,555	15,339

SOURCE: Features data from New York State Department of Health, 2024.

## Organization of This Report

HMG WNY serves a diverse area that varies in its socioeconomic composition. Even though needs vary by county, every county in the service area has at least some level of need for better coordination and provision of early childhood services. To assess how HMG WNY is serving this need, we conducted an evaluation of HMG WNY to examine how HMG WNY serves as a system-builder in the early childhood system of western New York. Our report provides insights that will inform HMG WNY's next steps in this work.

Chapter 2 outlines our evaluation approach. Chapter 3 provides further background on HMG WNY. Chapter 4 discusses the HMG WNY network, its partners, and the ties among partners. Chapter 5 assesses the progress of HMG WNY toward its system-building goals. Chapter 6 provides key learnings and opportunities for HMG WNY in its future work.

## Evaluation Approach

The purpose of our HMG WNY evaluation is to examine how HMG WNY serves as a system-builder in the early childhood system of western New York and to share information that will inform HMG WNY's next steps. The specific aims of our evaluation are to (1) assess HMG WNY's activities, outputs, and more-proximal outcomes in its transition from service delivery to system-building and (2) share learnings and generate actionable insights to further advance system-building goals (i.e., to support action tables, supply data to inform action, identify and collectively address gaps in resources and supports, and engage in policy advocacy).

With these aims in mind, we prioritized our evaluation questions as follows:

- To what extent are the system-building activities outlined in the strategic framework being implemented as intended, and what challenges and opportunities arise from these efforts?
- What are the scope, nature, and strength of the current network of system partners, and how do network partners connect and coordinate with each other? Where are opportunities for further network development (e.g., geography, type of partner)?
- How successfully do the current data and data infrastructure meet the needs of system partners, and what is needed to support data use and planning going forward?
- To what extent do system-level data inform advocacy, policy change, and sustainability decisions? What are the current efforts to advocate for systems change in early childhood, and how can HMG WNY be leveraged to support policy change?

Overall, our evaluation was designed to assess how HMG WNY's implementation approach influences the redesign and sustainability of the system to deliver more-effective supports for children and families.

## Data Sources and Analysis

We used a mixed methods evaluation that drew on multiple data sources. Our data sources included documents on HMG WNY's implementation; interviews with HMG WNY staff, key partners, and policymakers to understand their implementation activities, progress, challenges, and successes; and a network survey to understand what new connections have been made, the

strength of relationships in the network, what is changing at the organization and system levels from network involvement, and the facilitators and barriers to network involvement.

## Document Review

Our team regularly reviewed documents related to HMG WNY and its activities. We reviewed the HMG WNY monthly reports, materials from Governance Assembly meetings, and proposal and strategic planning documents. We also reviewed materials that described HMG WNY activities, such as screening and outreach tracking documents. We extracted and compiled the data on the number of outreach events, informational pieces distributed, new partners, active partners, developmental screenings by county, referrals, and formal partnership agreements in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The document review helped us understand the context of HMG WNY and complemented the data from our other sources. We did not independently review data reported in the documents provided by HMG WNY for accuracy (e.g., recount the number of screenings by service area).

## Interviews

In November and December 2023, we interviewed individuals or providers that HMG WNY considered to be active partners in its network at that time. Our team compiled a list of contacts from the document review and reviewed the list with HMG WNY to identify 18 potential participants with representation across the services areas (e.g., organizations in one of the six counties, regional organizations, and statewide organizations). Representatives from HMG WNY then emailed potential participants to introduce RAND and invite them to participate in an interview, which our team independently scheduled. Thirteen of the 18 invitees agreed to participate. One invitee declined the invitation, and four did not respond.

Over the course of the interviews, which lasted 30 to 60 minutes each, we asked interviewees about the general goals of HMG WNY and specific questions about community action tables, data systems and dashboards, the early childhood care system, and advocacy. One of our team members conducted the interview, while a second team member took notes. We recorded the interviews and used the recordings to fill gaps in the notes during analysis. We coded our notes and analyzed them for common themes regarding the evaluation topics and research questions.

In April and May 2024, we conducted a second set of interviews with members of the HMG WNY network whom we identified as well connected to other members. Using data from the network survey described below, our team identified 23 organizations that (1) reported connections to many members of the HMG WNY network and (2) had many members of the network reporting connections to them. We invited HMG WNY's primary contacts at each of these organizations to participate in an interview. The purpose of the interview was to learn more about how organizations build connections and the perceptions of HMG WNY's strategies to motivate organizations to participate in the early childhood network. We also asked participants about HMG WNY's progress on successfully meeting its goals. Of the

23 invited organizations, staff from 15 agreed to participate in an interview. Interviews were conducted by a member of our team and ranged from 30 to 60 minutes each.

We recorded the interviews and used the transcripts and notes taken by members of the team to code responses in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet by interview question (e.g., progress in achieving goals, approach to network-building). We then analyzed the data for common themes regarding evaluation topics, research questions, and interviewees' perceptions about implementation and impact. We present the common themes and findings in this report, which might not represent the perception of each organization with which HMG WNY has interacted since its redesign or in the broader western New York region.

## Network Survey

We conducted a network survey in January and February 2024 using the Program to Analyze, Record, and Track Networks to Enhance Relationships (PARTNER) tool (Varda and Sprong, 2020). The PARTNER tool provides the ability to examine members' connections, exchange of resources, the levels of trust and perceived value among network members, perceptions of success, the key players, and their impact on the network; the PARTNER tool also provides the ability to link outcomes to the process of collaboration. We used a version of the PARTNER survey that had been tailored for early childhood networks and further modified the response options to fit HMG WNY's network. In other early childhood studies, the PARTNER tool has been used to capture the strength and nature of connections among organizations. For instance, in an analysis of the Oregon Project LAUNCH (a national initiative to improve wellness among children prenatal to age 8), the PARTNER tool was used to assess whether there were growing levels of trust among organizations and how that trust led to improved services and other benefits from coordination (Deschutes County Health Services, 2014).

The version of the PARTNER survey that we used for this study had a set of organizational questions about what the organization contributes to the network, what progress the system has made, what the network's most important outcomes are, and how successful the network has been at reaching its goals. Each survey respondent was also asked to specify to which organizations in the HMG WNY network they were connected. For each connection, we asked a set of relational questions on the extent to which the organization is involved in the network, has influence on the network's mission, and contributes resources to the network. We also asked respondents to identify what contributions the organization has made to the network.

As noted above, our team compiled a list of organizations and points of contacts identified through the document review. We reviewed this list with HMG WNY to ensure its accuracy and adjusted it accordingly. Our team used this list of network partners to invite 82 organizations to participate in the survey. During the course of survey administration, we learned that the point of contact at one organization had departed; as a result, that organization was no longer part of the network. The final survey sample was 81 organizations, and staff from

54 participated in the survey, yielding a 67-percent response rate. Organizations that did not participate in the survey tended to be medical providers, school districts, or child-care centers. As shown in Table 2.1, there was some variation by primary service area(s) of organizations. Although some organizations worked in more than one county, we categorized them by their primary service area to calculate the response rate. It is also important to note that there was variation in the survey completion rate among respondents. For this reason, we report the number of responses for each question in the tables and figures in Chapter 4. Overall, the findings from our network survey should be interpreted with caution because of the low response and completion rates.

The PARTNER platform's functionality provides datasets for relational and non-relational analysis and generates network visualizations or maps. We downloaded and analyzed non-relational data (e.g., sector type, potential and most important contribution to the network) in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. We also use this dataset to analyze connections among organizations whose service areas were in particular geographic locations and organizations that worked in other locations. Analysis of the remaining relational data mostly occurred in the PARTNER tool. We used several social network analysis measures from the PARTNER tool (see Table 2.2). We also used the PARTNER platform to create and download network maps for the overall network and for centrality of members in the network and by service area (i.e., by county or western New York region).

**TABLE 2.1**  
**Response Rates, by Primary Service Area**

Primary Service Area	Response Rate ( <i>n</i> )
Allegany County	57% (4 of 7)
Cattaraugus County	0% (0 of 1)
Erie County	69% (29 of 42)
Genesee County	63% (5 of 8)
Niagara County	69% (11 of 16)
Orleans County	40% (2 of 5)
Wyoming County	50% (2 of 4)
Western New York	63% (5 of 8)
New York State	100% (3 of 3)

SOURCE: Features data from the PARTNER network survey.

NOTE: Eight organizations work in more than one of the seven counties served by HMG WNY.



**TABLE 2.2**  
**PARTNER Social Network Analysis Measures**

Definition	Calculation	Interpretation
<i>Density</i> in a network refers to how connected the members of that network are to each other.	Density is calculated as the percentage of actual connections that exist among members compared with the total number of connections that would exist if everyone was connected to everyone else.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Low density: Less than 20% of all possible connections are made.</li> <li>• Moderate density: Between 20% and 60% of all possible connections are made.</li> <li>• High density: More than 60% of all possible connections are made.</li> </ul>
<i>Degree</i> centrality is a measure of a node's activity or popularity in a network.	Degree centrality is the total number of edges connected to a node (ingoing and outgoing).	Degree centrality scores are best judged on a scale relative to the range of other scores in a particular network. The maximum degree centrality score is always the total number of nodes in a network minus one (because a node cannot be connected to itself). The minimum score is always 0.
Overall <i>value</i> is a measure of how much members value one another along three dimensions: power/influence, level of involvement, and resource contribution.	Survey respondents rated each dimension of value on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = not at all, 2 = a small amount, 3 = a fair amount, 4 = a great deal). The overall value score reflects the average of the scores along the three dimensions.	Scores of at least 3 out of 4, or 75%, are considered good scores. A network receiving a 100% value score (4/4) is one for which all members reported the highest levels of value.
<i>Trust</i> is a measure of how much members trust one another along three dimensions: reliability, mission alignment, and openness to discussion.	Survey respondents rated each dimension of trust on a scale of 1 to 4 (1 = not at all, 2 = a small amount, 3 = a fair amount, 4 = a great deal). The overall trust score reflects the average of the scores along the three dimensions.	Scores of at least 3 out of 4, or 75%, are considered good scores. A network receiving a 100% trust score (4/4) is one for which all members reported the highest levels of trust in one another.

SOURCE: Features information from Derr, 2020.

NOTE: A *node*—or circle on a network map—represents a partner in the network. An *edge* refers to where a connecting line touches a node.



## Help Me Grow Western New York

As described in Chapter 1, the strategic approach of HMG WNY is grounded in a set of activities to achieve the following four system-building goals (HMG WNY, 2021):

1. Support “action tables” working collaboratively to build a seamless system of supports responding to the needs of young children and families.
2. Supply data to inform action and measure progress.
3. Identify and collectively address gaps in resources and supports to ensure a well-functioning and responsive system of care and support.
4. Engage in policy advocacy for long-term sustainability of the system.

Figure 3.1 depicts the HMG WNY system change process, starting with the four system-building goals (column A) and the activities associated with each (column B). In the short and intermediate terms, HMG WNY will facilitate families, community leaders, early childhood providers, and community advocates in efforts tied to each of the system-building goals (column C). The long-term result of these efforts is meaningful and measurable change at the system and community levels (column D) that is sustained and strengthened over time. Collectively, these efforts might contribute to a long-term vision of developing and enhancing a cohesive system of early childhood development and care to foster optimal child growth and well-being (column E).

In the rest of this chapter, we describe HMG WNY’s structure and how its key partners perceived its efforts to expand the network of partners using data from our document review and interviews with system partners.

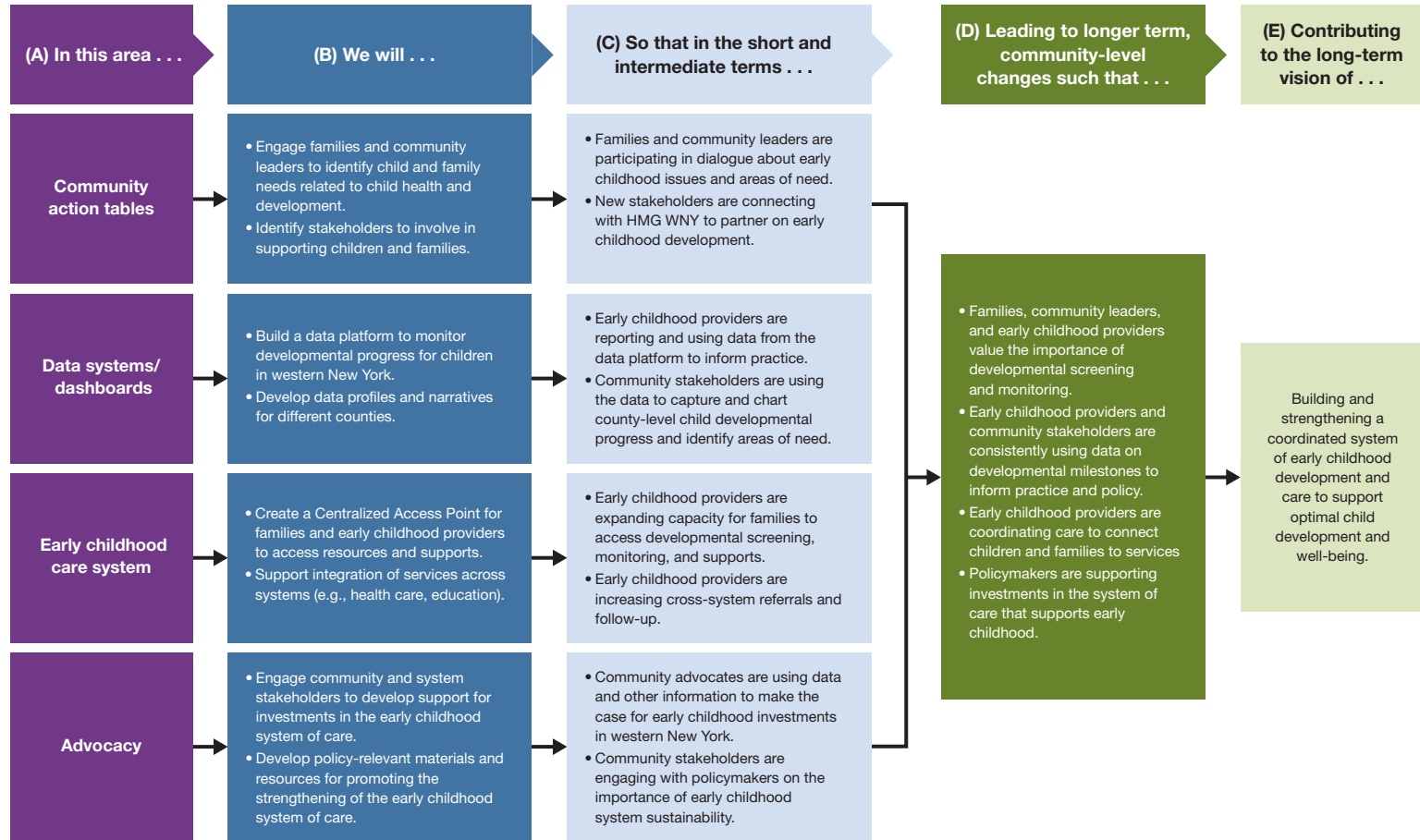
### Structure

According to its new framework on system-building, HMG WNY reorganized in 2021 with three strategic partners:

- **CCNY Inc.** serves as the organizing entity for HMG WNY and has responsibility for data collection and tracking. CCNY Inc. provides a variety of services, including evaluation, analytics, quality improvement, and training, to health and human services organizations.

FIGURE 3.1

Systems Change Processes for the Four System-Building Components of Help Me Grow Western New York



- **Parent Network of Western New York** offers educational resources and support for families with individuals who have special needs (from birth through adulthood) and for professionals who work with children with special needs. For HMG WNY, the Parent Network manages the Centralized Access Point (CAP) closed loop referral system.
- **Liftoff Western New York** conducts advocacy at the state and local levels for HMG WNY and for early childhood development more broadly. Liftoff is a network of early childhood system funders and leaders engaged in advocating for policy reform, supporting early childhood coalitions in the region, and increasing awareness of early childhood priorities.

HMG WNY convened a Governance Assembly with 24 members who met quarterly through 2023 to provide strategic guidance and share insights. Governance Assembly members represent a variety of child- and family-serving organizations, such as the Early Childhood Professional Development Institute and the Genesee County Mental Health Department, with minimal involvement from families of young children in the communities served by the network. Interview participants perceived that representation from health- and child-care providers was limited in the Governance Assembly and identified increasing participation among these types of organizations as an area of future growth.

HMG WNY formed several subcommittees to focus on different priority areas, including Policy and Advocacy, Community Outreach and Engagement, Data, and Families/Parents. In interviews, Governance Assembly members described their role as facilitating networking, identifying community needs, conducting brainstorming solutions, and providing feedback on the direction of HMG WNY.

According to interviewees, the Governance Assembly and its subcommittees met via a combination of in-person and virtual meetings. Even though in-person meetings offered more time for networking, the travel involved was prohibitive for some participants. Some members wanted the meetings to include more dedicated networking time or opportunities to strengthen network ties. Governance Assembly members appreciated having a set schedule and knowing in advance whether the meeting would be in person or virtual to facilitate their participation. Overall, Governance Assembly meetings were described as an effective use of time. The meetings were well run, had agendas, and were reasonably paced, including time for discussing and reporting on completed and upcoming activities. Several interview participants commented on HMG WNY staff using Governance Assembly meetings to brainstorm solutions to challenges, such as recruiting day-care centers and rural providers to the network. Governance Assembly members reported that their organizations also benefited from these HMG WNY-focused conversations.

During interviews, Governance Assembly members described how they were introduced to new organizations and expanded their network ties through the meetings, and a few desired more time built into the meeting's agenda for networking or deepening network ties. When meetings ended, assembly and committee members tended to depart for their next commitments instead of lingering for exploratory conversations with new connections.

## Partners' Perceptions of Help Me Grow Western New York

HMG WNY's network encompasses partners from a diverse array of sectors, including early education and child care, local and county government, family and human services, early intervention, mental and behavioral health, and K-12 education. This broad coalition ensures a comprehensive approach to early childhood development and care. Although the majority of network partners are concentrated in the more populous counties of Erie and Niagara, there is also significant representation from the rural counties in the region.

Most of the HMG WNY's system partners whom we interviewed knew of HMG WNY prior to its redesign but described it as an organization that was "floundering" and "spinning its wheels" before the redesign. This perception was salient among organizations that were formal partners for training and developmental screening or that funded related child well-being efforts. Other organizations that were familiar with HMG WNY and its focus on developmental screening but were not formal partners prior to 2020 reported this same perception before the redesign. During the strategic reorganization, HMG WNY partnered with CCNY Inc., which was described in interviews as a trusted organization in the early childhood sector. According to interviewees, this partnership brought credibility and trust in HMG WNY as a future system-builder. In its new form, HMG WNY was described in our conversations with partners as "growing and strengthening relationships" in the early childhood network and "improving the outcomes of young children and families in western New York."

Interviewees perceived HMG WNY's staff as strategic hires that brought strength to the organization. Reportedly, HMG WNY's staff have strong, trusted reputations; a large network in the early childhood community; and experience partnering with different organizations to overcome barriers in serving young children and their families. Interviewees noted that HMG WNY staff were always willing to make introductions to support the goals of individual organizations and, ultimately, young children and families in the region. One system partner commented that "passionate people recruit passionate partners," and as a result, the majority of interview participants described the quality of organizations in the HMG WNY network as strong. The overall caliber of system partners was attributed to the quality of HMG WNY staff and their process for identifying the right network partners, according to interview participants.

Unlike some other organizations in the early childhood sector, HMG WNY was described as "neutral" and not "competitive" with other organizations or "protective" of children and families by interview participants. HMG WNY's independence was perceived as adding credibility to its work expanding developmental screenings across the region and as being its distinguishing characteristic. Most organizations reported opting to partner with HMG WNY because of its alignment with their own missions to serve young children and families in the region and improve lifelong outcomes. Some system partners that we interviewed described enhancing or adding value to their organization through such efforts as capacity- and network-building. Some partners noted the benefits of connecting with new organizations and expanding their networks through the Governance Assembly meetings. Overall,

system partners characterized HMG WNY as being composed of three strong partner organizations whose staff are focused on partnering with a variety of organizations and facilitating partnerships among organizations to enhance the overall system that is available to young children and their families.





# Western New York's Early Childhood Network

HMG WNY's system-building activities were designed to strengthen the early childhood system in western New York. In early 2024, we conducted an initial assessment of the early childhood network through a survey of its partners. We used this assessment as a baseline for measuring the strength of the HMG WNY early childhood network of system partners and observing its evolution. In this chapter, we first examine the organizational level and focus on who the partners in the early childhood network are, how they contribute to the network, and what impact the early childhood network has had on them. We then move to the relationship level and examine the relationships, or connections, among partners in the early childhood network, including how the relationships were developed, how they were maintained, and which characteristics of the relationships provide a sense of the strength of the early childhood network. We use the network survey and interview data to support our analysis in this chapter. As noted in Chapter 2, the findings from the network survey should be viewed with caution because of the low response and completion rates.

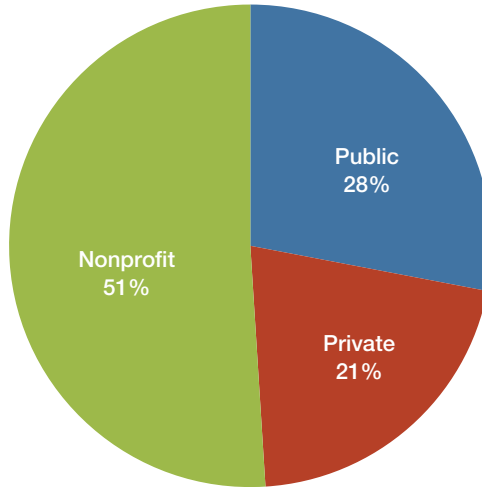
## Who Are the Partners in the Early Childhood Network?

The early childhood network of system partners in western New York comprises public, private, and nonprofit organizations (see Figure 4.1). Roughly half of partners represent nonprofit organizations, and the remaining organizations were public (28 percent) or private (21 percent).

The types of organizations in the early childhood network varied by geographic area (see Table 4.1). At least half the responding partners in Genesee, Orleans, and Wyoming Counties were public organizations. A larger proportion of the responding partners in Allegany, Erie, and Niagara Counties were nonprofits.

Network partners were concentrated in a few sectors (see Table 4.2). The leading sectors for partners were early education or child care (45 percent) and county or local government (16 percent). Partner organizations also worked in other sectors, such as the local library system. Some partners commented that the network would benefit from more participation

**FIGURE 4.1**  
**Types of Organizations in the Early Childhood Network (n = 53)**



SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: Is your organization a public or government agency, a private entity, or a nonprofit?

**TABLE 4.1**  
**Type of Organization, by Service Area (n = 60)**

Service Area	Public (%)	Private (%)	Nonprofit (%)
Allegany County	25	0	75
Erie County	19	27	65
Genesee County	80	20	0
Niagara County	40	20	40
Orleans County	50	50	0
Wyoming County	50	50	0
Western New York	20	20	60
New York State	0	33	67

SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: Is your organization a public or government agency, a private entity, or a nonprofit?

NOTE: Cattaraugus County does not appear in the table because there were no network survey respondents from this county.

from medical providers, day-care centers, and other child-care providers because these network members have the greatest direct access to young children.

The sectors represented in the early childhood network also varied considerably by geographic area (see Table 4.3). Those in Erie and Niagara Counties, the two most urban coun-

**TABLE 4.2**  
**Sectors Represented in the Early Childhood Network (n = 51)**

Sector	Percentage of Network (%)
Early education/child care	45
County/local government	16
Health/public health	14
Family/human services	6
Mental/behavioral health	4
Convene/connect/community organizing	2
Foundation/funder	2
Schools K-12	2
Other (e.g., local library system)	8

SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: In what area does your organization primarily work?

NOTE: Options not selected by any respondents were advocacy/policy, economic development, employment/workforce, faith based, food security/food access, higher education, housing stability/homelessness, and older adults/aging.

**TABLE 4.3**  
**Sectors Represented in the Early Childhood Network, by Service Area (n = 58)**

Sector	Allegany County (%)	Erie County (%)	Genesee County (%)	Niagara County (%)	Orleans County (%)	Wyoming County (%)	Western New York (%)	New York State (%)
Early education/child care	25	46	0	45	0	0	60	100
County/local government	25	8	40	27	50	50	0	0
Health/public health	0	23	0	18	0	0	0	0
Family/human services	25	4	0	0	0	0	20	0
Mental/behavioral health	0	4	20	0	0	0	0	0
Convene/connect/community organizing	0	4	20	9	50	50	0	0
Foundation/funder	0	0	0	0	0	0	20	0
Schools K-12	0	0	20	0	0	0	0	0
Other	25	12	0	0	0	0	0	0

SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: In what area does your organization primarily work?

NOTE: Options not selected by any respondents were advocacy/policy, economic development, employment/workforce, faith based, food security/food access, higher education, housing stability/homelessness, and older adults/aging.

ties in the region, for example, are more prevalent in early education and child care, as are network partners with a regional focus. HMG WNY worked in these counties prior to 2021, meaning it had more established partnerships and many with organizations positioned to administer developmental screenings (e.g., child-care providers). County and local government partners are also prevalent in many areas.

## How Do Partners Contribute to the Early Childhood Network?

Partner organizations in the early childhood network are poised to offer a variety of supports, expertise, resources, and connections to the early childhood network (see Table 4.4). The most prominent of these include services, resources, and support for young children and their families; support for and commitment to systems building; leadership in the early childhood field; expertise in early learning; sharing of knowledge about resources; community connections; and advocacy and policy change. When asked about their organization's most important contribution to the early childhood network, partners highlighted support and

**TABLE 4.4**  
**Partner Contributions to the Early Childhood Network**

Area of Contribution	Specific Type of Contribution	Potential Contributions to Network (%) (n = 49)	Most Important Contribution to Network (%) (n = 48)
<b>Support</b>			<b>34</b>
	Services, resources, and support for young children and their families	59	
	Support for and commitment to systems building	49	
	Communication/public relations technical assistance	12	
	Volunteers and volunteer staff	10	
	Funding	8	
<b>Expertise</b>			<b>32</b>
	Leadership in the early childhood field	51	
	Expertise in early learning	51	
	Expertise in family support and parent education	33	
	Expertise in social, emotional, and mental health	27	
	Expertise in physical health	10	
	Organizational management and expertise	10	

**Table 4.4—Continued**

Area of Contribution	Specific Type of Contribution	Potential Contributions to Network (%) (n = 49)	Most Important Contribution to Network (%) (n = 48)
Resources			14
	Sharing of knowledge about resources	57	
	Community resources	41	
	Training and professional development opportunities	29	
	In-kind resources	20	
	Paid staff to participate in early childhood work	20	
Connections			14
	Community connections	63	
	Facilitation/community convener	33	
	Coordination of services with other providers in the network	31	
Advocacy and policy change		47	4
Data/research		16	0

SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey questions: Please indicate what your organization/program/department contributes, or can potentially contribute, to the early childhood network. Select all that apply. What is your organization's most important contribution to the early childhood network?

expertise. Few network members noted data or research as a contribution, and none identified it as their key contribution.

## How Do Partners Perceive the Early Childhood Network?

Network partners identified different ways in which the early childhood network enhanced their organizational capabilities in everyday practice (see Table 4.5). The most commonly cited examples were improved ability to make meaningful connections with other organizations (69 percent), impact on children and families (57 percent), and information-sharing with other organizations (55 percent). One well-connected partner said,

Since I've joined though, we've definitely increased our work in the early childhood arena more than we had before. And I do think that helped me grow as a part of that. . . . It's one of our tools in our tool belts.

Even though there were clear benefits to participating in the early childhood network, partners faced several challenges (see Table 4.6). The most prevalent of these was funding, which was cited by 45 percent of partners. Staff turnover in member organizations was

**TABLE 4.5**  
**Improvements Attributed to Early Childhood Network (n = 42)**

Area of Improvement	Percentage (%)
Make meaningful connections with other organizations	69
Positively impact children and families	57
Share information meaningfully with other organizations	55
Align your work with other organizations	48
Assess the opportunities and challenges related to early childhood in your context	45
Respond to the opportunities and challenges related to early childhood in your context	45
Leverage your own or others' work	24

SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: Thinking of your everyday practice, has the early childhood network improved your organization's ability to . . . Select all that apply.

**TABLE 4.6**  
**Challenges with Participation in the Early Childhood Network (n = 44)**

Type of Challenge	Percentage (%)
Funding	45
Leadership transitions/staff turnover	39
Bringing groups together <sup>a</sup>	39
Bureaucracy in the system	30
Differences in organizational priorities <sup>b</sup>	27
Capacity for advocacy work	27
Effective leadership to move things forward	9
Lack of political will in the system	9
Communication in the network/messaging/communication strategies	9
There are no challenges to participating in the network	16

SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: What are the greatest challenges your organization faces in your participation in the early childhood network? Select all that apply.

<sup>a</sup> This challenge encompasses the following response options: difficulty in bringing stakeholders together (time, geographic barriers, etc.), lack of previous relationships between sectors/agencies, and lack of resources to coordinate across stakeholder groups.

<sup>b</sup> This challenge encompasses the following response options: competing priorities of partners, different perspectives of partners, and lack of mission congruence among partners.

another major issue with 39 percent noting staff or leadership transitions as one of the greatest challenges. Addressing this turnover and its effects often took precedence over network participation, according to interview participants.

Bringing groups together was cited by 39 percent of partners as one of the greatest challenges because of a lack of prior collaboration among sectors and limited resources to facilitate cross-sector coordination. As reported by interviewees, trust issues also hindered partnership development; organizations sometimes compete to provide similar services and fear that collaboration could negatively affect their revenue or reduce their competitive edge. Bureaucracy in the early childhood system was cited by 30 percent of partners as a challenge to participation.

Different priorities between individual organizations and the network and the varying perspectives among partners further complicated engagement in the early childhood network. These were cited as a challenge by 27 percent of partners. The sheer number of networks in the early childhood sector was overwhelming for some interview participants. In interviews, most partners reported participation in several early childhood-focused networks, coalitions, and collaboratives in addition to the one led by HMG WNY. Reportedly, HMG WNY staff also participated in many of the other coalitions or networks. One partner said, “It’s difficult to be at all the tables all the time, and there is seldom communication between entities. If you miss a meeting, you don’t know what’s happening with a particular coalition or effort.” In our interviews, partners noted that the coalitions or networks they participated in were slightly different, and although the time commitments added up, it was worthwhile to participate in each of them.

Capacity for advocacy work also presented a challenge to participating in the early childhood network (27 percent). Our discussions with network members suggested that advocacy work was not the top priority for organizations. Although advocacy work was an area of interest, dedicating time and effort to it was not feasible at the current time. Other challenges were less frequently identified, and 16 percent of respondents reported no challenges to participation. Participants also noted some positive experiences, citing mission alignment and effective communication in the network as facilitating participation.

## How Are Partnerships Built in the Early Childhood Network?

The network survey explored the relationships, or connections, among the 81 organizations that were identified as part of the early childhood network in western New York. The survey presented respondents with a list of these 81 organizations, and respondents were asked to select the organizations with which they had an informal or formal relationship. For each connection that respondents identified in the survey, participants answered a series of questions on how the relationship was developed, what activities were involved in the relationship, and what resulted from the relationship.

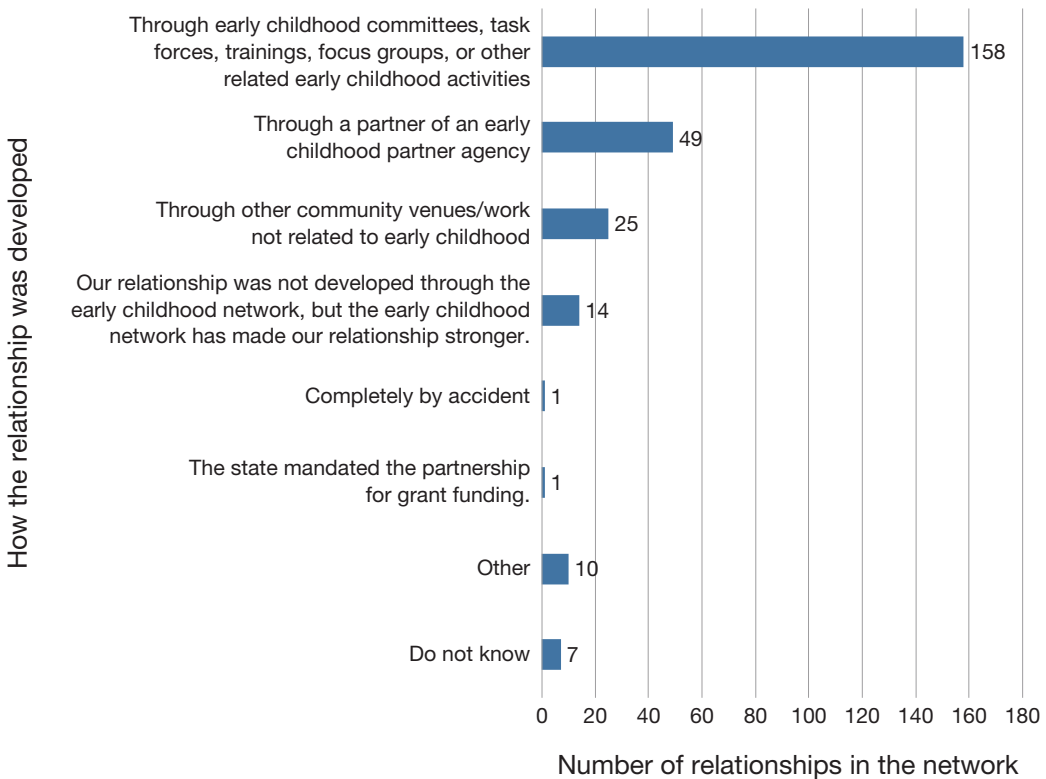
The network survey found 324 connections across 74 organizations in the early childhood network. Seven organizations were not connected to any other member of the network, which means that they were one of the 81 organizations HMG WNY identified as a partner but none of the survey respondents identified that organization as a partner. However, not

every member of the network responded to the survey, meaning there are potentially more relationships among members.

Network partners built relationships with others primarily through early childhood committees, task forces, trainings, focus groups, or other related early childhood activities (see Figure 4.2). Introductions from a shared partner organization were the second most common means of developing relationships. Other common means of developing partnerships were through other community venues or work not related to early childhood.

These common methods were echoed in our conversations with network members. In interviews, some partners also noted that involvement in the early childhood network not only strengthened existing connections but also laid the groundwork for new ones. For example, one partner reflected,

**FIGURE 4.2**  
**How Relationships Were Developed in the Early Childhood Network (n = 265)**



SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: From the list, select organizations/programs/departments with which you have an established relationship (either formal or informal).  
NOTE: See the appendix for the network map of each service area in the early childhood network.



It [the early childhood network] helped me connect with others out there. Joining it was, I think, a very strong thing for me to do for the organization. Just sharing of information, learning from each other, I think it's been a great connection and then it's a reminder for me to bring those pieces into our networking and conversations.

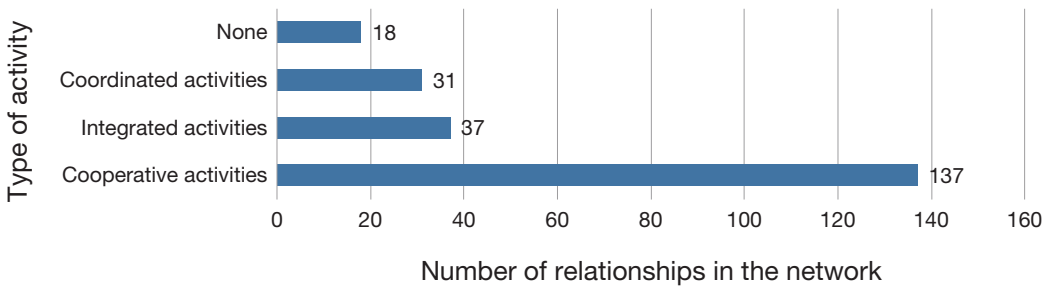
Some well-connected partners confirmed in interviews that the network strengthened existing relationships, including those developed outside the network, which was consistent with our network survey's findings. Some of the more highly networked partners shared that even though their organizations were well connected in their service area, their involvement with the early childhood network opened doors to new collaborative opportunities. For example, the network's broader regional focus facilitated introductions to organizations that were located beyond a partner's immediate geographic areas but were still capable of serving communities across the region. Our discussions with highly connected partners also revealed that the network's size expanded over time through the development of personal relationships with staff from various organizations. Most partners recounted introductions at meetings, conferences, and other community activities, which echoed our survey's findings. Several partners mentioned learning about an organization during these interactions and subsequently following up to explore potential collaborations. For some partners, the approach was strategic; staff identified organizations that could meet the specific needs of the children and families they served and actively sought out contacts in those organizations. At times, a shared partner served as a bridge by introducing organizations that had no previous connection. This blend of serendipitous and strategic networking has contributed to the growth and value of the early childhood network.

The relationships among network partners involved a variety of activities, including the following:

- cooperative activities, such as exchanging information, attending meetings together, and providing resources to partners (e.g., informing other programs about the release of a request for applications)
- coordinated activities that encompass cooperative activities and involve deliberate efforts to boost each other's capacity, ultimately benefiting all programs involved (e.g., different granting programs might use shared administrative processes and forms for application review and selection)
- integrated activities that build on cooperative and coordinated activities by leveraging commonalities to establish a unified center of knowledge and programming, which supports work in related content areas, such as developing and using shared priorities for funding effective prevention strategies and possibly combining funding pools.

Most network relationships (137 of 223; 61 percent) were maintained through cooperative activities (see Figure 4.3). Discussions with some of the highly connected partners confirmed our network survey's findings that engaging in cooperative activities, such as quarterly meetings with partners, shared events, and meetings for other networks, was their primary method

FIGURE 4.3

**Types of Activities to Maintain Early Childhood Network Relationships (n = 223)**

SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: What kinds of activities does your relationship with this organization/program/department entail? Select one response.

for developing and sustaining partnerships. Some specifically mentioned HMG WNY meetings as key opportunities for connecting with network members. In addition to cooperative efforts, 14 percent of relationships (31 of 223) were maintained through coordinated activities that involved deliberate efforts to enhance the capacity of each organization involved. Furthermore, 17 percent of relationships (37 of 223) were maintained using integrated activities, which combine elements of both cooperative and coordinated efforts with shared aims to develop a unified center of knowledge and programming. Of the 223 relationships, 18 did not involve any of these defined activities, which points to variations in how relationships are maintained in the network.

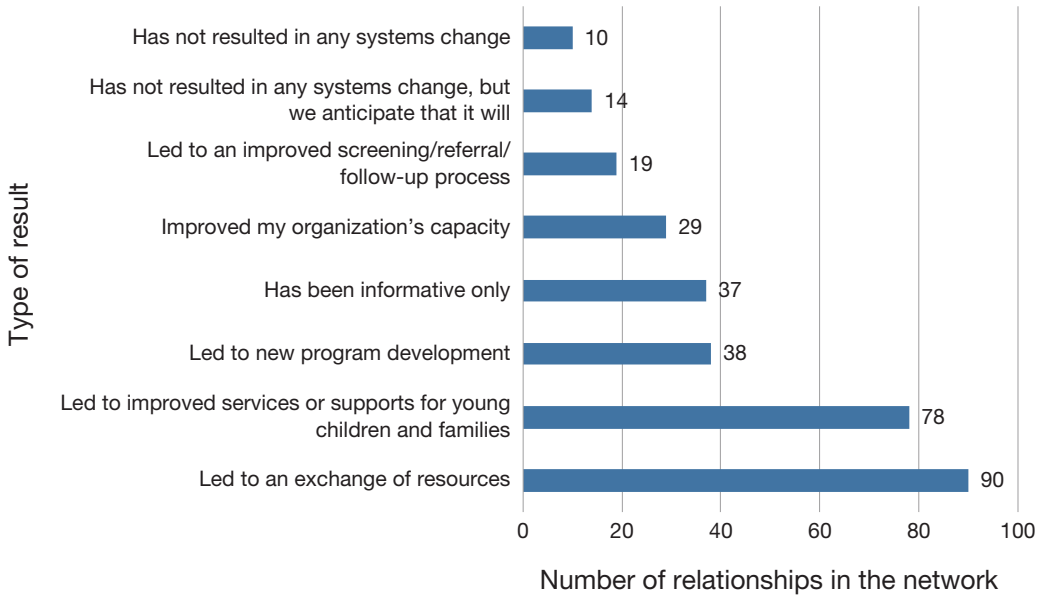
The exchange of resources among organizations was the most frequently cited result of these relationships (see Figure 4.4). Other common results were improved services of support for young children and their families and new program development. Although a small number said that the relationships had not resulted in systems change, some said that they anticipated their relationships would.

## How Strong Is the Early Childhood Network?

As we noted previously, the HMG WNY early childhood network comprises 81 organizations, and there are 324 relationships or connections among these organizations. Figure 4.5 displays the HMG WNY early childhood network in a network map and assigns each organization an identifying number.

The nodes—or circles on the map—represent partners in the early childhood network. The lines represent the presence of a relationship between organizations, and the arrows indicate the direction of the relationship. An *outgoing relationship*, which is shown by an arrow leading from an organization, is one in which that organization reaches out to another. An *incoming relationship*, which is shown by an arrow pointing toward an organization, is one in which another organization reaches out to that organization.

FIGURE 4.4

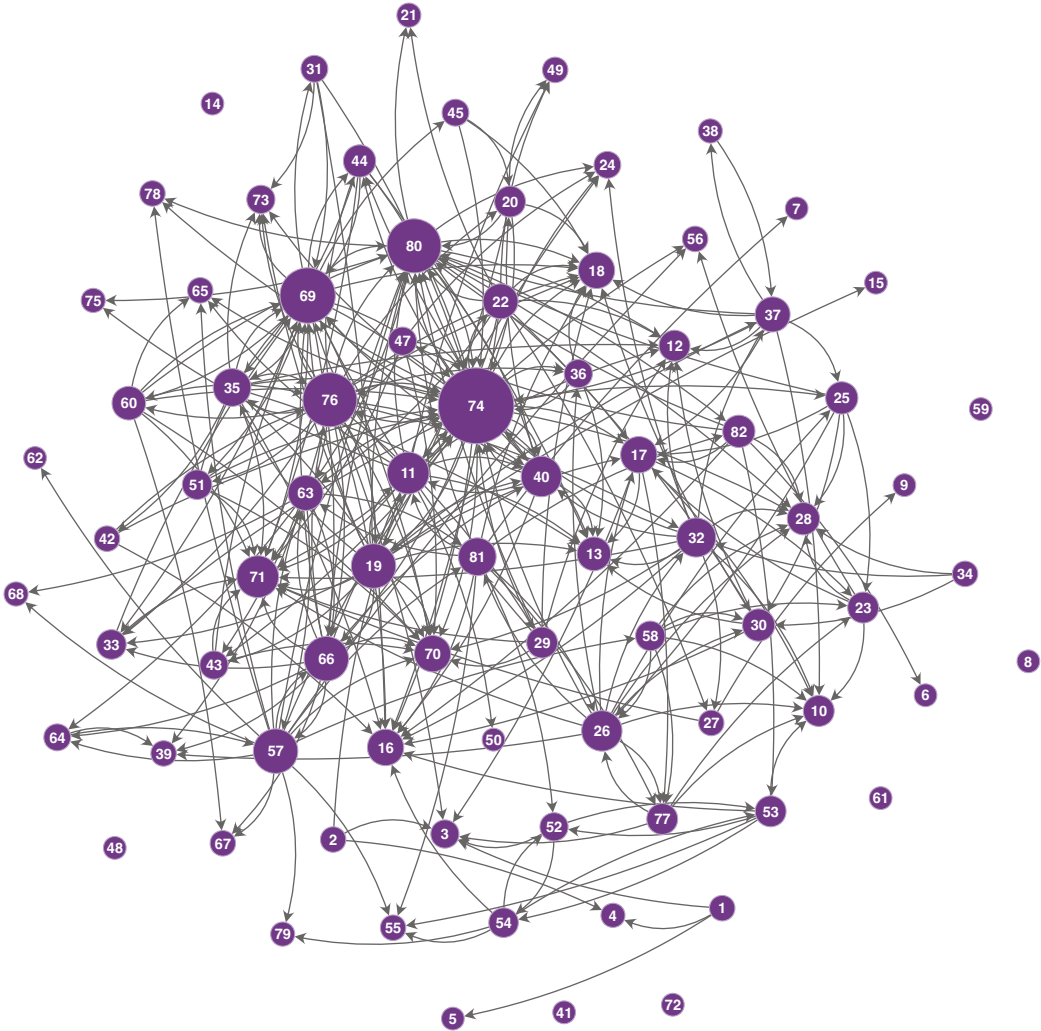
**Results of Relationships Among Early Childhood Network Members (n = 315)**

SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: This partnership has . . . Select all that apply.

*Density* in a network refers to how connected the members of that network are to each other. Overall, the early childhood network in western New York has 5-percent density. This means that of all the possible relationships in the network, 5 percent of them are established. As described in Chapter 2, a low-density network is one in which less than 20 percent of possible connections are made.

*Centrality* is a way to measure how connected or important a particular node is in a network. Centrality counts how many direct connections a node has to other nodes. In the HMG WNY early childhood network, the highest possible score for a partner's centrality was 80. The analysis shows that the centrality scores in the network ranged from 0 to 47. Even though many nodes are equally sized, some stand out as larger (e.g., by size, nodes 74, 80, 76, 69), which indicates that these organizations have a higher degree of centrality or connectedness (see Figure 4.5). A high centrality score suggests that a node is very active in the network. The organization might be initiating many interactions or receiving a lot of attention from others. Nodes with high centrality might act as opinion leaders or influencers. They are likely to have more information and exert more influence in the network because they are connected to many others. Five of the six organizations with a centrality score of 20 or more focused their work on the broader HMG WNY service area. Four of these organizations focused on the western New York region (nodes 74, 80, 76, 71), and one focused on statewide support for children and families (node 69). The other organization with a high degree of centrality (node 19) served only Erie County. Two of the highly connected regional partners and the

**FIGURE 4.5**  
**Density of the Early Childhood Network**



SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: From the list, select organizations/programs/departments with which you have an established relationship (either formal or informal).  
 NOTE: See the appendix for the network map of each service area in the early childhood network.

Erie County partner are networks or coalitions in the early childhood space. The statewide organization and the other two regional partners provide technical support and assistance to early childhood providers.

Table 4.7 shows the connectivity of organizations in their specific service areas and across the broader early childhood network. The service area column indicates where the respondent primarily works, and each other column shows the number of connections to network members

**TABLE 4.7**  
**Number of Connections in and Across Service Areas**

Service Area	Allegany County	Erie County	Genesee County	Niagara County	Orleans County	Wyoming County	Western New York	New York State
Allegany County ( <i>n</i> = 2)	5	1	1	0	0	0	0	0
Erie County ( <i>n</i> = 26)	1	90	1	8	1	1	34	29
Genesee County ( <i>n</i> = 5)	3	11	13	2	5	0	4	0
Niagara County ( <i>n</i> = 10)	0	0	4	23	4	4	16	9
Orleans County ( <i>n</i> = 2)	2	8	5	2	3	3	3	0
Wyoming County ( <i>n</i> = 2)	2	0	5	2	3	3	3	0
Western New York ( <i>n</i> = 4)	2	36	1	7	1	1	10	6
New York State ( <i>n</i> = 1)	0	8	0	3	0	0	3	2

SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: From the list, select organizations/programs/departments with which you have an established relationship (either formal or informal).

NOTE: Cattaraugus County is excluded from the table because (1) no organization from this county responded and (2) no organization reported a relationship with network partners located in Cattaraugus County. Eight organizations work in multiple counties.

that work in each service area. Overall, organizations operating in a particular county, such as Allegany County, are mostly connected to other organizations that work in the same county or adjacent counties. Connections outside a service area were mostly to organizations focused on supporting children and their families in the western New York region. Although there are notable connections at the regional level, there were fewer ties to statewide organizations.

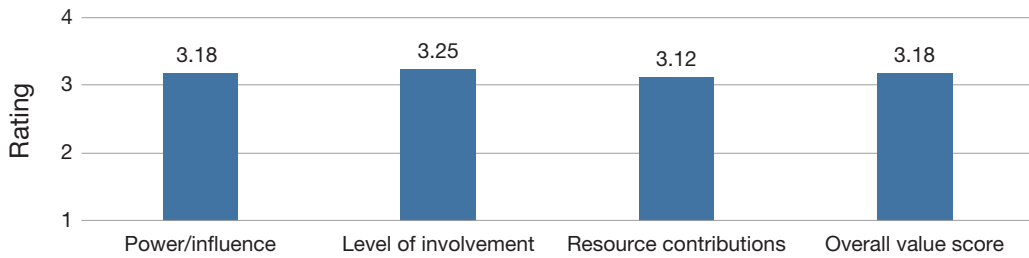
## Perceived Value of the Early Childhood Network

The value of network partners was assessed along three dimensions: (1) the extent to which the organization has power and influence to impact the overall mission of the early childhood network, (2) the organization's level of involvement in the early childhood network, and (3) the extent to which the organization contributes resources to the early childhood network. Each of the three dimensions is weighted equally in the overall score.

In the western New York early childhood network, partners perceived high value from their network connections across all dimensions (see Figure 4.6). Most partners rated the network highly (at least 3 out of 4) for power and influence, involvement, and resource contribution, which yielded an overall value score of 3.18 (out of 4). This result indicates a high perceived value of the early childhood network in this early phase.

During our interviews, partners described how they continuously evaluated the value of each of their relationships, including to the early childhood network, to ensure that there was a benefit primarily to not only the children and families they served but also to the organization. When the relationship was perceived as valuable, organizations made investments to main-

**FIGURE 4.6**  
**Value of the Early Childhood Network**



SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey questions: To what extent does this organization/program/department have power and influence to impact the overall mission of the early childhood network? What is this organization/program/department's level of involvement in the early childhood network? To what extent does this organization/program/department contribute resources to the early childhood network?

tain participation. When the relationship was no longer valuable, participation diminished, or the relationship was discontinued. Finally, interviewees noted that participation in a network comprising low-performing or low-contributing organizations undermines an organization's influence in the community and poses risks to the network's overall functionality. For this reason, partners indicated that they approach participation in a network thoughtfully and with a degree of caution.

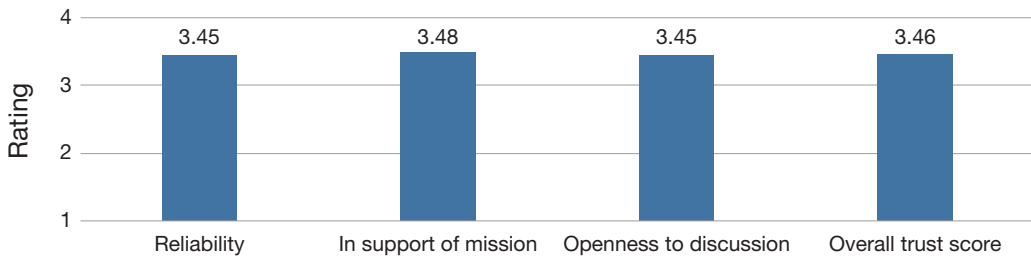
## Trust in the Early Childhood Network

In our network survey, trust was assessed according to partners' views on three key aspects: (1) the reliability of the organization, (2) the extent to which the organization's mission is aligned with that of the early childhood network, and (3) the organization's openness to discussion. The overall trust score is the average of the scores from the three dimensions, and each dimension is weighed equally.

The early childhood network received an overall trust score of 3.46 out of 4, which indicates high levels of trust in the network (see Figure 4.7). The network scored highly in all three trust dimensions: reliability, mission alignment, and openness to discussion. In this early stage, trust was recognized as a strength of the HMG WNY early childhood network.

In our discussions with partners, some mentioned engaging in collaboratives or networks cautiously. Initial participation was limited (e.g., quarterly meetings) to explore the extent to which members would deliver on what they agreed to do or the extent to which there was progress on the stated goals. Partners also reported considering the extent to which time spent in network activities aligned with the mission of their organizations. Partners described increasing involvement once they were confident participation would benefit the children and families they serve. A staff member from one well-connected organization reflected on how trust in partnerships builds over time:

**FIGURE 4.7**  
**Trust Among the Early Childhood Network**



SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey questions: How reliable is the organization/program/department? To what extent does the organization/program/department share a mission with the early childhood network's mission and goals? How open to discussion is the organization/program/department?

I think doing more events and being able to rely on each other—definitely the trust of following through when you're asked to participate in something—goes a long way. They're going to continue to reach out [and that follow-through can be trusted].

In interviews, partners described various behaviors that initially built confidence, such as sending prompt email responses, sending materials or resources as discussed, and fulfilling commitments to attend meetings. Openness to discussion was emphasized as crucial for addressing challenges in partnerships, and honest communication was highly valued because it facilitated easier resolution of issues when they arose. Each organization consistently examined the benefits, risks, and potential trade-offs of partnerships.





## Progress Toward Help Me Grow Western New York’s System-Building Goals

As we described in Chapter 3, HMG WNY’s strategic framework is designed to establish a coordinated early childhood development and care system that enhances the development and well-being of children in this region. The framework outlines a series of activities aimed at achieving four key system-building goals (HMG WNY, 2021):

1. Support “action tables” working collaboratively to build a seamless system of supports responding to the needs of young children and families.
2. Supply data to inform action and measure progress.
3. Identify and collectively address gaps in resources and supports to ensure a well-functioning and responsive system of care and support.
4. Engage in policy advocacy for long-term sustainability of the system.

In this chapter, we first describe HMG WNY’s activities in each of those four areas and then examine how network partners describe the early childhood systems’ progress, outcomes, and overall success. Sources for this chapter’s analysis include a document review, interviews, and network survey data.

### Building the Early Childhood Network of System Partners

Achieving its goal to develop the early childhood network in western New York requires HMG WNY to cultivate partnerships with families, community leaders, and early childhood providers who all recognize the importance of early childhood and developmental screening and monitoring. By engaging families and community leaders to identify the needs related to child health and development, organizations establish a direct dialogue in which these key groups can voice the specific areas and issues they face. This participatory approach ensures that the discussions are relevant and tailored to the actual needs of the community, thereby enhancing the effectiveness and responsiveness of early childhood initiatives. Furthermore, identifying and involving new partners in these efforts not only broadens the support network for children and families but also facilitates fresh partnerships and collaborations. These new

connections with HMG WNY and each other help to integrate diverse resources and expertise, which further strengthens community-wide support for early childhood development.

Beginning in 2021, HMG WNY moved away from a primary focus on supporting developmental screening and monitoring to concentrate on a broader effort to strategically build relationships with key partners that are capable of collaborating to identify and address gaps in the early childhood system of care. In 2023, HMG WNY centered its partnership goals on cultivating relationships in rural regions, specifically with pediatric clinics and school districts. To form these partnerships, HMG WNY directly approached potential partners while relying on their sector or county-level Governance Assembly members to serve as champions or ambassadors and bring others to the system through word of mouth. In rural counties, HMG WNY's activities included directly connecting with pediatric practices and day-care centers to share information and resources. HMG WNY also went into the community to develop relationships, participated in 66 outreach events across six counties, and reached more than 600 caregivers, providers, or agency staff to advocate for developmental screening and monitoring through 2023.

By the end of 2023, HMG WNY formed or strengthened partnerships with 75 agencies, organizations, or coalitions across six counties. HMG WNY also made headway with 17 additional partners to foster discussions about the importance of developmental screening and monitoring. In the first quarter of 2024, HMG WNY established nine new partnerships. Overall, partners spoke positively about HMG WNY's efforts to grow the early childhood network of system partners (see Figure 5.1). HMG WNY not only has increased the total number of partners but also has expanded into new counties, increased cross-sector representation and types of partners (e.g., school districts, public health), and added more organizations in rural counties. A few Governance Assembly members noted that as HMG WNY

**FIGURE 5.1**  
**System Partners' Perspectives on Help Me Grow Western New York's Growth**



SOURCE: Features quotations from respondents' answers to the authors' interview question on how different organizations perceive the growth of Help Me Grow Western New York.

expanded, it selected “important” or “well-known” partners in new counties, and several members predicted that network growth in those new counties would be easier because the right partners were at the table. Others suggested health-care providers, child-care providers, and families of young children in the communities served as targets for future recruitment.

These positive impressions continued during our discussions in spring 2024. Most of the highly connected partners felt that considerable progress was made in building an early childhood network that represented a diverse set of partners. One partner said,

On networks, I think they're doing really good work, getting different people to the table. Different organizations that have different cohorts of people. Usually [organizations in different networks and early childhood collaboratives] overlap, of course, but just reaching out to different organizations and people, bringing them into the meetings to get their ideas and help us streamline the things that we're trying to get done. I think they're doing really well at that.

Partners also reflected on new participants at HMG WNY meetings, and one shared that

I want to say there that's an excellent one that they're meeting [working collaboratively to build a seamless system of supports]. I see them at many events that I'm also at. Anytime I've asked them to participate in any event that we're putting on, they will come and bring a table. They've actually been someone who has shared their information, whether it was through a networking meeting to being part of a panel [with our organization to build knowledge and awareness].

Overall, interviewees reported that HMG WNY connected organizations and added value to organizations by sharing information and resources to benefit children and families in the region. However, there was also agreement among interviewees that HMG WNY could make further progress in building its early childhood network and reputation in the region by continuing to spend considerable time “listening and trying to figure out what our needs are and what they can successfully give to that.” Even though there are several other early childhood coalitions, collaboratives, networks, and task forces throughout western New York, interviewees described HMG WNY as thoughtfully considering how to fill gaps to benefit children, families, and organizations rather than duplicating services.

For 2024, HMG WNY is focusing on pediatric practices and hospital systems with plans to formally partner with at least one rural pediatric provider, continue with the pediatric Lunch and Learn sessions, and conduct presentations for medical providers. HMG WNY is also working to connect with home-based day-care providers through such activities as a listening tour and a presentation to the home-based provider network.

## Addressing Gaps in Resources and Supports

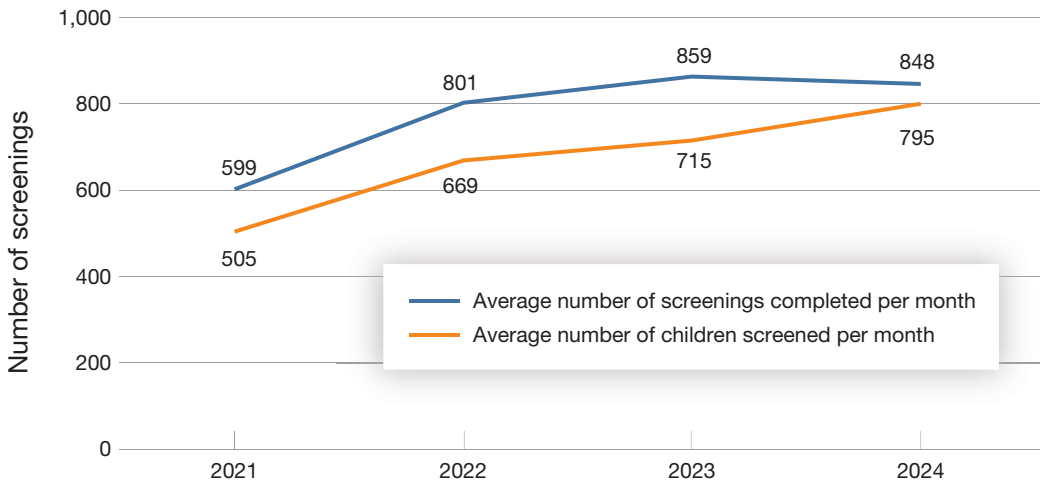
According to its transition to a system-building orientation, HMG WNY aims to enhance the capacity of early childhood providers to offer families more comprehensive access to developmental screenings, monitoring, and support services. This expansion is seen as crucial to ensure that developmental issues can be identified and addressed promptly. Additionally, HMG WNY plans to support providers in improving the mechanisms for cross-system referrals and follow-ups, which streamlines the process of connecting children and families with the necessary services. These concerted efforts in expanding access and refining referral processes enable early childhood providers to effectively coordinate care and aim to seamlessly connect children and their families to a spectrum of supportive services that are tailored to their needs.

Since HMG WNY's inception, developmental screening was the cornerstone of its work. HMG WNY's shift toward a system-building approach meant expanding beyond individual providers and engaging with school districts, pediatric clinics, hospital systems, and other child- and family-serving networks, particularly those serving rural counties, to advance early childhood developmental screening. To achieve this goal, HMG WNY used a variety of strategies, including hosting Lunch and Learn sessions at pediatric practices serving rural communities, targeting rural school districts, and supporting developmental screening at partner community events. When possible, HMG WNY focused its partnership efforts on specific ZIP codes or Census tracts and worked to establish partnerships with providers serving young children in those areas. A review of HMG WNY documents indicated that through December 2023, HMG WNY added 32 new screening partners, including four pediatric clinics and four school districts, and supported partners in launching developmental screening. In early 2024, a fifth pediatric practice was added.

From January 2022 through May 2024, HMG WNY expanded access to developmental screening with more than 24,000 screenings conducted for approximately 20,500 children across eight counties. The total number of developmental screenings increased from 7,190 in 2021 to 9,609 in 2022 and to 10,312 in 2023. The average number of developmental screenings per month increased from 599 in 2021 to more than 800 in each year from 2022 through May 2024 (see Figure 5.2). HMG WNY artifacts indicate that more than 95 percent of developmental screenings in 2022 and 2023 were in the higher population counties of Chautauqua, Erie, and Niagara. In our interviews, some of HMG WNY's partners noted that community-based organizations were generally supportive of and invested in early childhood screenings, in part because of HMG WNY. According to interviewees, some communities, particularly those with historically marginalized populations, were less committed to screenings, in part because of concerns about the sensitivity needed to discuss screening results with families.

In 2023, HMG WNY established two benchmarks for screening: Screen at least 50 children in each of the five rural counties (Allegany, Cattaraugus, Genesee, Orleans, and Wyoming) and increase the percentage of children who receive three Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ-3) screenings by age 3 from 8 percent to 16 percent. HMG WNY reached the rural

**FIGURE 5.2**  
**Average Developmental Screenings per Month in Eight-County Area**



SOURCE: Features data reported by HMG WNY in nonpublic monthly progress reports provided to the authors.

screening goal in Allegany County (84 screenings) and Cattaraugus County (270 screenings) but fell short in Genesee County (22 screenings), Orleans County (1 screening), and Wyoming County (1 screening). HMG WNY screened more than the goal of 16 percent of children in Erie County (19 percent) and Niagara County (31 percent) but only screened from 1 to 10 percent of children in the other counties.

To identify and collectively address gaps in resources and supports, HMG WNY is creating a CAP for families and early childhood providers to access resources. When families call the CAP, a family resource specialist conducts an intake interview to understand their situation and concerns and to provide tailored service referrals that meet those needs. The specialist continues to assist the family in navigating resources and addressing issues until the family is successfully connected with the appropriate services. The CAP also supports the integration of services across systems to address gaps. For the CAP, HMG WNY established a goal of successfully linking 75 percent of families referred for services to those services and assisting at least one family from each of seven counties in 2023. To help reach its CAP-related goals, HMG WNY conducted direct outreach at a wide variety of community events, such as provider resource events, preschool fairs, and parent network activities, and pursued rigorous follow-up for referred families. According to documents, through April 2024, HMG WNY had participated in 72 community outreach events; engaged with almost 750 caregivers, providers, or agency staff to promote developmental screening and monitoring; and distributed nearly 750 information pieces on CAP.

Through these efforts, HMG WNY increased the number of families using the CAP from 81 in 2022 to 94 in 2023 and the number of screenings completed by families using a program-specific link from 104 to 120. At the same time, the number of screenings completed by the

CAP coordinator decreased from 26 to 17, the number of referrals made decreased from 10 to 8, and CAP coordinator interactions, such as emails, in-person visits, calls, or texts, decreased from 115 to 95.

In interviews, HMG WNY partners described the CAP as a crucial resource for families and child-serving organizations. There was strong buy-in for the CAP's role in matching families with appropriate organizations that can cater to families' specific needs and universal support for this role as a priority. Furthermore, interview participants described the CAP as a potential solution to bridge critical gaps in the siloed early child-care system and perceived HMG WNY as a trusted entity to effectively fulfill this role in the region. However, interviewees knew relatively little about HMG WNY's progress with the CAP and commented on the need for improved communication and understanding about how the CAP operates and its current usage. Several interviewees expressed a desire to learn more about it.

Although there was optimism for HMG WNY's CAP, some interview participants also expressed concern about the potential number of organizations that are developing CAP-like products or services in the region. One partner stated,

I have not heard any progress in particular [for HMG WNY], and that's one of the things that's redundant for several organizations in the community. . . . I'm not sure what else is there to be done, but there's so many groups looking at the gaps and trying to build the child-care community, early childhood special education community, all of it.

Another partner commented,

Because we all know it's a huge need, so it's not that the more isn't merrier. I'm not sure that they did anything different from anyone else or have achieved any more than anyone else. . . . I don't think we've solved anything.

Finally, one partner reported that New York state was possibly developing a CAP, and if it progressed, a regionally focused one might be duplicative and unsustainable.

For 2024, HMG WNY aimed to continue its central Three by Three objective, which seeks to boost the proportion of children undergoing three developmental screenings by age 3. Additionally, HMG WNY set specific targets to enhance CAP usage. These targets included getting feedback that 15 caregivers had learned about HMG through their medical providers, raising the percentage of children under age 2 served by the CAP from 26 percent to 35 percent, and creating a work group dedicated to improving caregiver and provider awareness of developmentally appropriate practices and early childhood development. To make progress toward these goals, HMG WNY planned to organize a meeting with one partner organization to collaborate on improving the dissemination of developmentally appropriate information to caregivers and providers and to better understand the existing efforts and bringing key players together to address this need effectively.

## Supporting Network Partners with Data

A key component of HMG WNY's system-building approach is supplying data to inform action and measure progress. HMG WNY considered the development of a data dashboard as crucial to its efforts to support early childhood providers in actively reporting and using data to refine its practices. The data dashboard was designed to enable participating partners to upload child-level developmental screening data and then use the platform to track the data over time. Simultaneously, HMG WNY planned to develop a community dashboard to aggregate the data from all participating partners. That tool would support community partners in monitoring developmental progress at the county level and help pinpoint specific areas needing attention. Together, these activities contribute to a robust framework in which both early childhood providers and community partners consistently rely on data concerning developmental milestones to inform and enhance their practices and policies. Overall, HMG WNY intends for this data-driven approach to facilitate targeted interventions and support informed decisionmaking in early childhood development across the region.

HMG WNY employed a continuous improvement approach to building the data dashboard to monitor children's developmental progress. In 2023, HMG WNY formalized agreements with 17 early childhood care providers to contribute screening and referral data to the data dashboard. HMG WNY also sought to glean insights from the data to develop or improve existing action plans and to ensure that advocacy efforts are informed and effective. To this end, HMG WNY used the data dashboard to produce and distribute county-level data profiles with screening data and action steps so that community partners in six counties can chart progress and identify areas of need. HMG WNY also improved the dashboard's functionality by allowing partners to access their own data with a site-specific login.

Across system partner interviewees, there was familiarity with the data dashboard and the recognition that the dashboard was an asset to the community and served as a model for other organizations to emulate. Some Governance Assembly members expressed a need for training on how to effectively use the dashboard, a request that was echoed by screening partners following their contributions of data. Additionally, health-care providers reportedly encountered challenges with the duplication of ASQ-3 entries between their electronic medical records and HMG WNY's records and described this duplication as an issue to address as more providers join the network. These challenges and others resulted in a slow ramp-up for using the dashboard and its data. Among interview participants who reported using it, their activities ranged from grant-writing to forecasting staff needs for early intervention services.

In our discussions with system partners, they began to recognize the potential applications of the data dashboard and were optimistic about how it could inform and enhance their organization's work in the future. By the end of 2023, there was some emerging evidence of data being used to inform action. For example, one interviewee described how an early childhood work group in one county was leveraging HMG screening data to target outreach efforts toward communities that have conducted few early childhood developmental screenings. Overall, HMG WNY made considerable progress in the development of the dashboard



and analysis provided to the network. The dashboard was described as comprehensive and setting a “gold standard” by system partners.

For 2024, HMG WNY established goals for its data-driven approach that involved developing a data equity and distribution plan that adheres to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) best practices, such as ensuring data are collected from diverse populations, widely accessible, and shared regularly. HMG WNY aims to provide data to both providers and the public on a quarterly basis at least, which could enable them to comprehend current trends and advocate effectively for children. To meet these goals and enhance transparency and engagement around its data usage, HMG WNY planned to draft an overview brief that explains what data HMG WNY collects, how the data are used, and what measures are taken to ensure the data's security. HMG WNY also planned to conduct a focus group consisting of early childhood service providers to review the data dashboard and send regular follow-up emails with participating providers. These activities were designed to foster a better understanding and facilitate effective use of the data among partners.

## Advocating for Policy Change

Realizing HMG WNY's system-building goals hinges on its ability to successfully leverage data and other pertinent information to advocate for increased investments in early childhood programs across western New York. Through HMG WNY's advocacy agenda, it aims to present evidence-based arguments that highlight the critical need for funding and resources at the county, regional, and state levels that support children's development. HMG WNY also plans to support community partners in their active engagement with policymakers. Together, these proactive engagements and data-driven advocacy efforts are seen as instrumental to educating and persuading policymakers about the value of investing in the early childhood system. For 2023, HMG WNY slightly refined its advocacy approach to concentrate on disseminating information about the importance of developmental milestones and screenings throughout western New York and on addressing the systemic factors that contribute to disparities in early childhood health care access and developmental outcomes. Although some network partners were aware of the policy advocacy priority, most had limited knowledge of specific advocacy efforts.

In early 2023, HMG WNY collaborated with early childhood system partners in the region to advocate for \$500,000 in the state budget for the state-level HMG, which represented an increase of \$300,000 from the 2022 budget. In partnership with Liftoff Western New York, HMG WNY provided written and oral testimony at the Joint Budget Hearing on Social Services and obtained member budget letters in support of HMG from a senator and an assemblyman. In May 2023, these efforts secured \$1 million in state funds for the state-level HMG. In mid-2023, Liftoff built on these efforts by creating and introducing a six-month advocacy plan for HMG New York State and its executive advisory committee. HMG WNY then evalu-



ated the plan and explored opportunities for executing its activities, guided by regional- and county-level data.

Through 2023, HMG WNY shared information with the broader network in a variety of ways. For instance, during fall 2002, HMG WNY collaborated with the Early Childhood Funders Collaborative to organize a meeting at the New York Funders Alliance Annual Conference. Other information- or resource-sharing activities included a social media campaign related to HMG WNY and the importance of early childhood developmental screenings, evidence-informed trainings on developmental milestones and screenings, and a free text-based service that sends developmentally appropriate information based on the child's age. Additionally, some network partners intended to integrate the dashboard data into their advocacy work, thereby promoting HMG WNY and advancing the objectives through their own efforts. By the end of 2023, HMG WNY's efforts to share information and connect with partners to build support for early childhood investments resulted in relationships with 13 regional or state-level organizations, networks, or coalitions. These entities spanned various sectors, including early childhood education and social services.

HMG WNY's equity-related activities included sharing and using the system-level indicators on the data dashboard. For example, HMG WNY led a training and discussion on displaying data through an equity lens at a virtual HMG conference. HMG WNY initiated efforts to form a parent advisory group and to launch a social media campaign that connects parents with data that they can use to advocate for their needs. HMG WNY also started to develop partnerships with organizations that are focused on serving non-White children and families and those living in poverty. Finally, Liftoff consistently used the real-time data and insights provided by HMG WNY to shape its policy and system-change initiatives at both the state and county levels.

Even though HMG WNY engaged in a variety of advocacy-related activities, there was limited knowledge and awareness of advocacy and policy progress among interview participants. Those with familiarity of work in this area pointed to meetings of the HMG WNY team with policymakers in Albany as important progress and identified the increase in funding from the state for HMG as a major accomplishment.

## What Progress Has Help Me Grow Western New York Made to Build the Early Childhood Network?

HMG WNY's activities related to its system-building goals are designed to build a coordinated system for early childhood development and care. Our network survey highlighted several areas that align with the strategic goals of HMG WNY in which significant progress toward building an early childhood network has been made in 2024. Table 5.1 shows areas of progress for each of the four system-building goals.

Overall, considerable progress was made in areas related to **building the early childhood network of partners**. The most substantial advancements were in improving knowledge and

**TABLE 5.1**  
**Early Childhood System's Progress (n = 46) and Key Outcomes (n = 44)**

System-Building Goal and Area of Progress	Areas of Progress (%)	Most Important Outcome (%)
<b>Building the early childhood network of system partners</b>		<b>52</b>
Improving knowledge and awareness of early childhood issues and community resources and programs to support young children and families among cross-sector partners	57	27
Increasing focus on physical, social-emotional, and mental health issues for young children	48	9
Increasing collaboration among cross-sector partners	43	5
Creating a shared vision for the broader early childhood system among cross-sector partners	37	7
Improving the quality and quantity of relationships between cross-sector partners	30	2
Increasing organizational capacity among cross-sector partners	17	2
<b>Supporting network partners with data</b>		<b>5</b>
Increasing data-sharing (formal or informal) among cross-sector partners	30	0
Improving the use of data to drive policy and practice changes among cross-sector partners	20	5
<b>Addressing gaps in resources and supports</b>		<b>20</b>
Developing effective strategies to support high-quality, accessible services to support young children and families	35	18
Improving coordination across domains to address the needs of children and families among cross-sector partners	26	2
Increasing referrals to community programs among cross-sector partners	24	0
<b>Advocating for policy change</b>		<b>2</b>
Increasing shared advocacy or policy work among cross-sector partners	28	0
Improving coordination of project/funding among cross-sector partners	11	2
<b>Don't know</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>20</b>

SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey questions: Progress has been made in the early childhood system in the following areas over the past year . . . Which is the early childhood network's most important outcome?

awareness of issues affecting young children and families (57 percent). Additionally, there was notable progress in augmenting community resources and supports for these issues; 48 percent of network members observed an increased focus on physical, social-emotional,

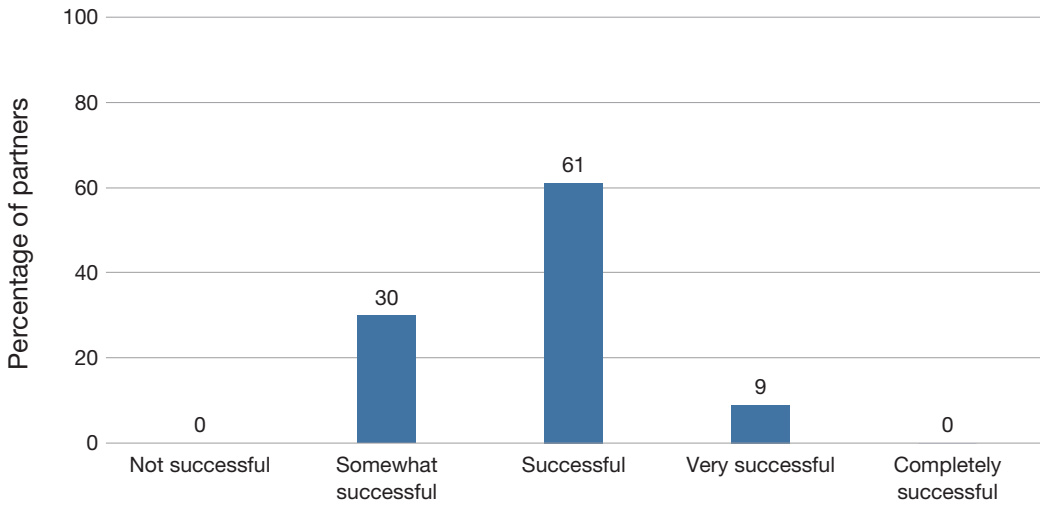
and mental health issues. Furthermore, 43 percent of network members reported improvements in collaboration in the network, which aligns with HMG WNY's objective to foster collaboration among cross-sector partners. Progress was also evident in forming a shared vision for the early childhood system, as noted by 37 percent of partners, and in the quality and quantity of relationships among network partners. Finally, 17 percent of partners noted an improvement in the organizational capacity among partners.

Network partners also recognized progress toward HMG WNY's goal of **supporting network partners with actionable data**. Thirty percent of partners noted improvements in data-sharing, both formal and informal, among cross-sector partners. Additionally, 20 percent of partners observed better use of data to influence policy and practice changes in the network. HMG WNY's efforts to **identify and address gaps in resources and supports** have also had positive results. According to 35 percent of partners, the early childhood network has developed effective strategies to enhance access to high-quality services for young children and families. Moreover, 26 percent of network partners reported improved coordination across different domains to better meet the needs of children and families, and 24 percent of partners noted an increase in referrals to community programs. For HMG WNY's goal related to **advocating for policy change** to ensure the long-term sustainability of the early childhood network, 28 percent of partners witnessed improvements in shared advocacy or policy work among cross-sector partners. Some also noted better coordination of funding among network members (11 percent). Despite these areas of improvement, 22 percent of partners were unaware of the system's progress over the past year, which indicates a potential area for better communication and engagement moving forward.

A significant portion of network partners (52 percent) identified progress related to network building as the most important outcome of the early childhood network. Specifically, enhancing knowledge and awareness of early childhood issues and resources was seen as the most important outcome (27 percent). Addressing gaps in resources and supports to establish a well-functioning and responsive system of care was rated as the next most important outcome by 20 percent of partners; developing effective strategies to provide high-quality, accessible services for young children and families constituted most of that total. Despite half of network partners reporting progress in the use of data to inform action, only 5 percent of partners viewed improvements or increases in using data to drive policy and practice changes as the network's most important outcome. Few members identified policy and advocacy as a critical outcome. Notably, 20 percent of partners were unsure about which outcome was most important for HMG WNY. In our interviews, there was little knowledge or awareness of the four system-building goals guiding HMG WNY's efforts. Taken together, these results suggest a need for clearer communication about the network's goals and achievements.

All partners perceived the network as achieving at least some success in reaching its goals (see Figure 5.3). More than 60 percent of partners reported that the network was successful, 30 percent considered it to be somewhat successful, and 9 percent viewed it as very successful.

**FIGURE 5.3**  
**Degree of Network's Success in Reaching Its Goals (n = 44)**



SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: How successful has the early childhood network been at reaching its goals? Goals of the network include working collaboratively to build a seamless system of supports responding to the needs of young children and families; using data to inform action and measure progress; identifying and collectively addressing gaps in resources and supports to ensure a well-functioning and responsive system of care and support; and engaging in policy advocacy for long-term sustainability

## Learnings and Opportunities

HMG WNY’s 2021 strategic planning process resulted in a new vision and framework that is centered on creating a coordinated system for early childhood development and care and fostering optimal development and well-being for children in this region. This report serves as a key milestone for HMG WNY as its leaders evaluate its early progress in achieving its four system-building goals (HMG WNY, 2021):

1. Support “action tables” by working collaboratively to build a seamless system of supports responding to the needs of young children and families.
2. Supply data to inform action and measure progress.
3. Identify and collectively address gaps in resources and supports to ensure a well-functioning and responsive system of care and support.
4. Engage in policy advocacy for long-term sustainability of the system.

Through our analysis of documents, partner interviews, and a network survey, we identified key learnings that focus on progress and success for HMG WNY’s early childhood network. We also identified opportunities for continued progress and growth.

### Key Findings and Insights

HMG WNY is dedicated to fostering a system that promotes child development and well-being. The reorganization with CCNY Inc., Parent Network of Western New York, and Lift-off Western New York at its core has brought credibility and trust in HMG WNY and enabled it to make considerable progress in building the early childhood network. Furthermore, the well-regarded and well-connected staff at these organizations were committed to using their resources to better support partners in the early childhood network. HMG WNY also established a Governance Assembly along with various subcommittees comprising diverse partners from the early childhood sector to guide the direction of HMG WNY. By leveraging the expertise and knowledge of its staff and the Governance Assembly, HMG WNY has successfully developed and strengthened a coordinated system of early childhood development and care in western New York. The key findings and insights for each system-building goal are summarized below.

## Building the Early Childhood Network of System Partners

HMG WNY has successfully facilitated collaborative action tables and worked to build a coordinated system for early childhood development and care that responds to the needs of young children and their families. Partners in the early childhood system identified this network development as HMG WNY's most important outcome to date. These partners recognized the value added by HMG WNY through capacity and network building and its role in connecting various organizations and enhancing community awareness. Overall, HMG WNY's progress toward this system-building goal includes

- enhancing knowledge and awareness among partners about issues affecting young children and their families through the sharing of information and resources
- increasing the visibility of HMG WNY through direct community engagement and outreach events for providers and families
- bringing a broader and more diverse group of cross-sector partners to the early childhood network, the Governance Assembly, and its subcommittees, which enhances the network's reach and functionality
- establishing strategic partnerships in rural counties to facilitate collaboration on identifying and addressing gaps in the system of care
- coordinating efforts to fill gaps to benefit children, families, and organizations to avoid duplicating services.

## Addressing Gaps in Resources

HMG WNY has enhanced the early childhood network's ability to identify and collaboratively address gaps in resources and supports. This ability to adapt and respond has shown the value of a flexible and responsive system that prioritizes the needs of young children and their families. Overall, HMG WNY progress toward this system-building goal includes

- developing effective strategies for engaging with a broad array of child- and family-serving providers around the importance of early childhood developmental screening and monitoring
- building the capacity and competencies among early childhood providers for developmental screenings
- expanding access to developmental screenings in and across counties in western New York
- establishing the CAP to streamline access to resources and address service gaps.

## Supporting Network Partners with Data

HMG WNY has implemented a data dashboard that is crucial for enabling early childhood providers to actively use data to refine their practices and ensure the accuracy and timeliness of information. The data dashboard has set the standard in the region for monitoring devel-

opmental screenings, tracking progress, and using the data to inform policy and practice. Overall, HMG WNY progress toward this system-building goal includes

- establishing agreements with early childhood providers to contribute screening and referral data, which enhances the functionality and utility of the dashboard
- producing and distributing county-level data profiles that allow community partners to monitor progress and identify needs
- facilitating the use of dashboard data by early childhood network partners to inform their outreach and advocacy efforts.

### Advocating for Policy Change

HMG WNY has engaged in policy advocacy to ensure the long-term sustainability of the system, which has included significant interactions with policymakers and increased state funding. Overall, HMG WNY progress toward this system-building goal includes

- advocating for an increase in state funding for the state-level HMG, raising it from \$200,000 in 2022 to \$1 million in 2023
- leveraging regional and county data to collaborate on a six-month advocacy plan to support the state-level HMG
- engaging in information-sharing activities through partnerships with regional or state-level organizations and campaigns to promote early childhood developmental screenings
- increasing its equity focus by supporting the use of data for advocacy.

### Strength of the Early Childhood Network

Nearly all organizations in the early childhood network reported relationships with each other in the network survey. Members built their relationships mostly through participation in early childhood coalitions, task forces, and networks, such as the one led by HMG WNY. Ongoing participation facilitated the maintenance of these relationships. Some organizations were more central to partnerships in the network. Highly connected members mostly had a regional or statewide focus. Organizations whose work focuses on the county level primarily partner with organizations that work in the same county or a neighboring one. Members are cautious when opting to enter partnerships with organizations or join networks, and partners examine factors related to trust and value in the earliest stages of relationship-building. As a possible result of this approach, there is already a high level of trust and value in the early childhood network.

## Opportunities

The HMG WNY system-building approach for the early childhood network has made considerable progress, but there are opportunities for continued growth or improvement. Some of these opportunities for improving the early childhood system might also have relevance for other initiatives or communities with similar goals. Our assessment of HMG WNY's implementation and network partners pointed to the following opportunities to further enhance its system-building efforts.

### Partnership Development and Engagement

- Enhancing communication about HMG WNY with partners and the broader community could improve knowledge and awareness of the system-building activities and early childhood network as follows:
  - Implement more-robust communication strategies to ensure all partners are well-informed and engaged in the network's activities and goals.
  - Deepen engagement with system partners and community leaders to further enhance their alignment and commitment to shared goals.
  - Focus on system-building activities that are clear, targeted, and well communicated to all partners.
  - Improve the quality of networking interactions through structured networking times or dedicated sessions for building relationships.
  - Implement a systematic approach to gather feedback from all partners, including families, and adapt strategies and operations accordingly.

### Developmental Screenings and Monitoring

- Continuing a targeted approach to expanding the number of screening partners, improving usage of the CAP with consistent access to young children and their families, and monitoring the landscape of CAP efforts could be accomplished as follows:
  - Continue establishing connections with medical, center, and home-based child-care providers, who typically have more frequent contact with young children and families, to implement developmental screenings.
  - Expand rural screenings and partnerships.
  - Enhance developmental screening training opportunities for providers.
  - Improve messaging on CAP usage and linkages.
  - Evaluate the benefit of the CAP compared with similar efforts coordinated by state, regional, and other agencies focused on early childhood outcomes.



## Data Capabilities

- Further development of data capabilities can enhance the ability to monitor, evaluate, and respond to the needs of the early childhood network more effectively as follows:
  - Increase awareness and engagement among all partners, including providing training on how to effectively use the data dashboard.
  - Explore ways to address the data-sharing challenges faced by medical providers.

## Advocacy Efforts

- Continued and enhanced advocacy efforts are necessary to secure sustainable funding and policy support, which could be accomplished as follows:
  - Expand relationships with policymakers and leverage data to support advocacy efforts for increased state and regional investments in early childhood programs.
  - Intensify efforts to familiarize partners with ongoing advocacy work and policy changes to ensure coherent and aligned actions.
  - Invite families to the early childhood network, including the Governance Assembly, to increase voice and participation of families in the screening, referral, and intervention processes.

## Early Childhood Network Building

- The network survey serves as a baseline for understanding the breadth, depth, and strength of the early childhood network system of partners; identifying key partners; and finding opportunities for building relationships to achieve shared goals. Using the PARTNER tool, HMG WNY can maintain the partnership database and repeat administration of the survey to measure and observe the evolution of the network over time. In addition, the network might continue to be strengthened as follows:
  - Convene members to increase the number and strength of relationships in the network, and design convenings with their needs in the forefront.
  - Facilitate partnerships among members that work in different counties, along with connections to members with a regional or statewide focus.
  - Continue to evaluate contributions of members to maintain high levels of trust and value in the network.

The efforts of HMG WNY underscore the importance of a coordinated approach in system-building and emphasize the need for continuous engagement with multiple partners and the integration of data-driven decisionmaking processes. Furthermore, HMG WNY's

approach of integrating data-driven strategies, enhancing community collaboration, and focusing on policy advocacy has been effective. These strategies could serve as a model for similar initiatives that aim to improve early childhood development outcomes.

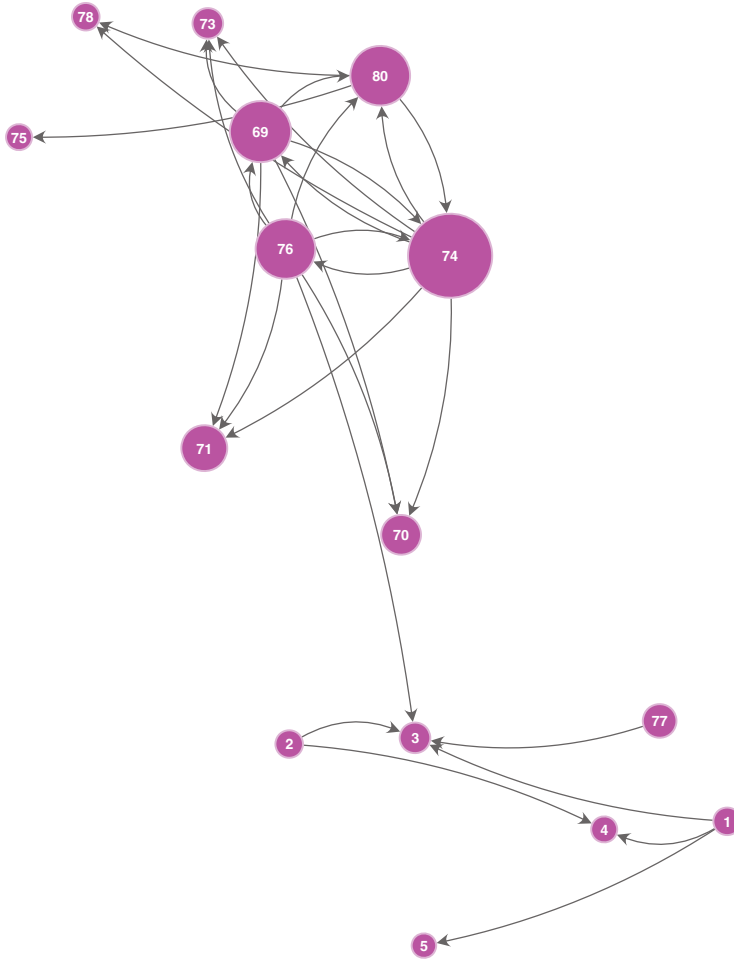
## Network Maps by Service Area

This appendix presents the network map for each service area in western New York:

- Figure A.1 represents Allegany County, which had 15 nodes and 28 relationships.
- Figure A.2 represents Erie County, which had 49 nodes and 218 relationships—the most in any service area.
- Figure A.3 represents Genesee County, which had 18 nodes and 39 relationships.
- Figure A.4 represents Niagara County, which had 25 nodes and 79 relationships.
- Figure A.5 represents Orleans County, which had 14 nodes and 28 relationships.
- Figure A.5 represents Wyoming County, which had 14 nodes and 28 relationships.

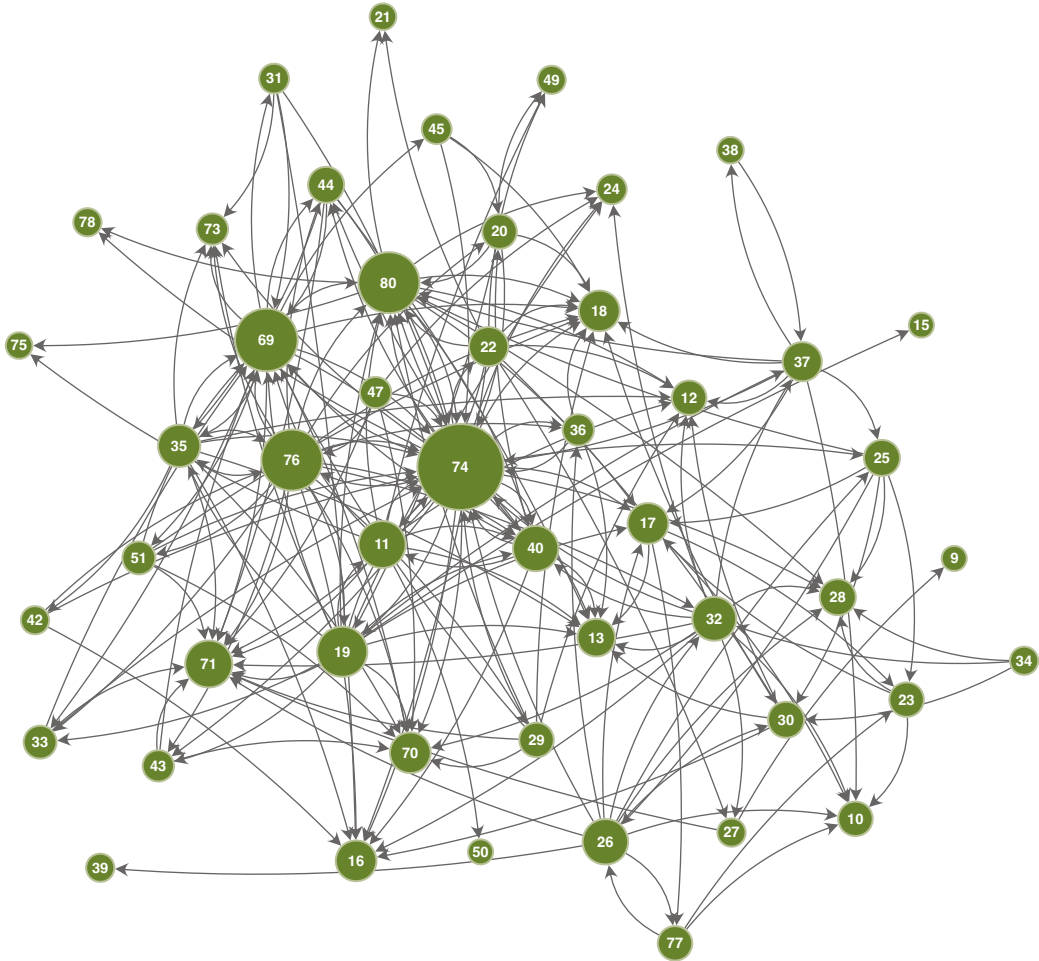
The network map for Cattaraugus County is not shown because there were no network survey respondents from this county.

**FIGURE A.1**  
**Allegany County Network Map**



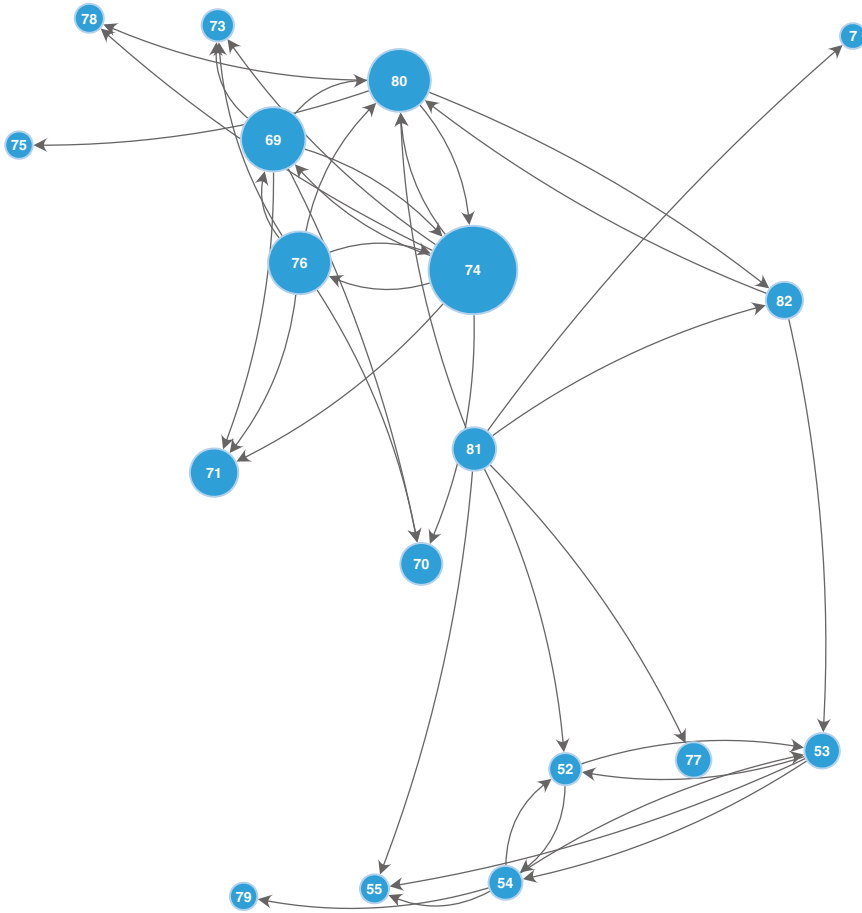
SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: From the list, select organizations/programs/departments with which you have an established relationship (either formal or informal).

**FIGURE A.2**  
**Erie County Network Map**



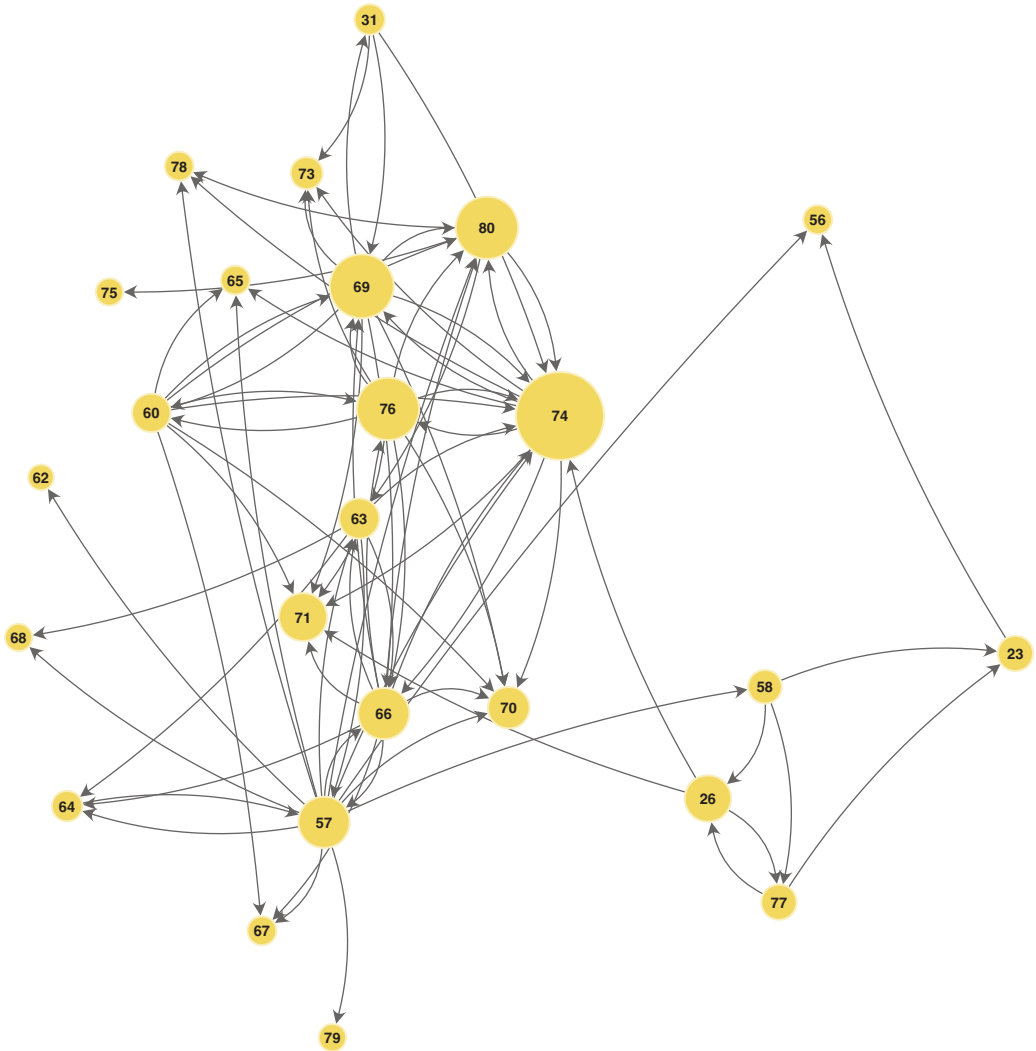
SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: From the list, select organizations/programs/departments with which you have an established relationship (either formal or informal).

**FIGURE A.3**  
**Genesee County Network Map**



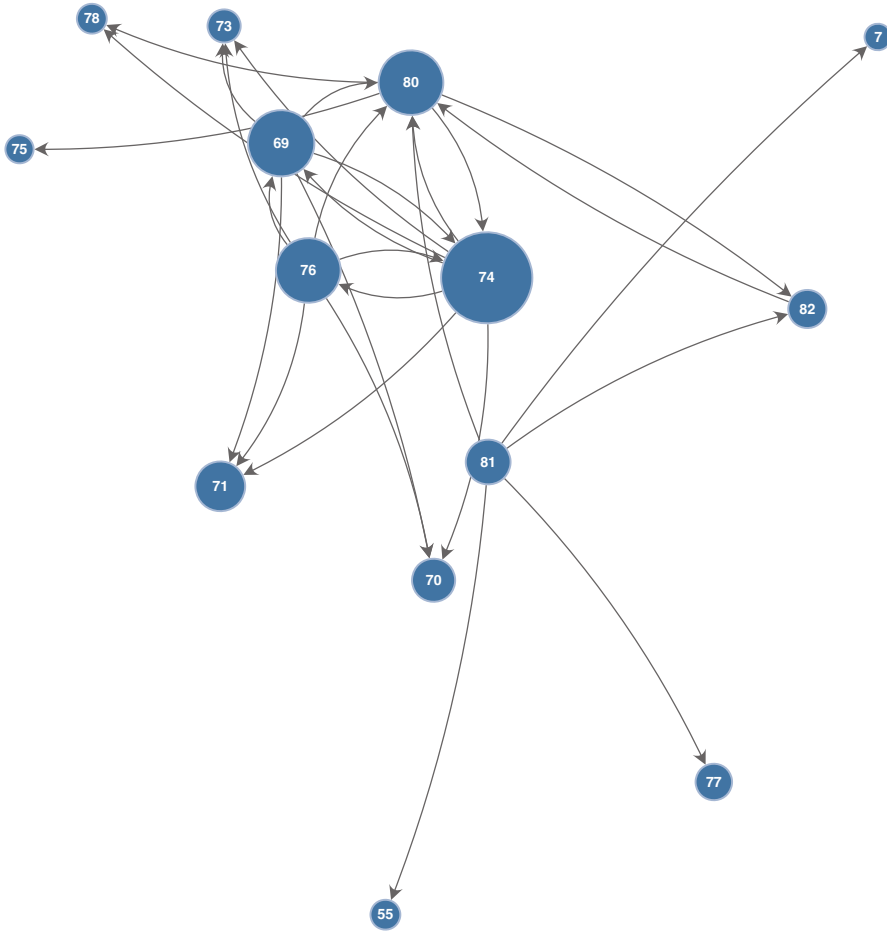
SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: From the list, select organizations/programs/departments with which you have an established relationship (either formal or informal).

**FIGURE A.4**  
**Niagara County Network Map**



SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: From the list, select organizations/programs/departments with which you have an established relationship (either formal or informal).

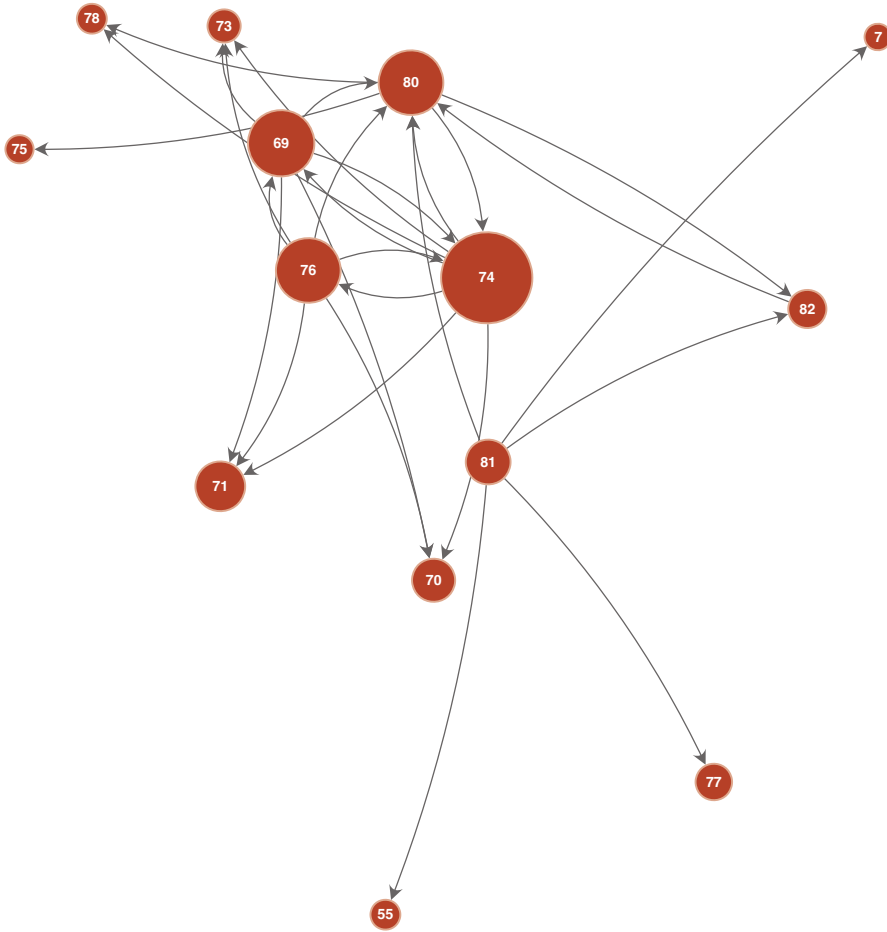
**FIGURE A.5**  
**Orleans County Network Map**



SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: From the list, select organizations/programs/departments with which you have an established relationship (either formal or informal).



**FIGURE A.6**  
**Wyoming County Network Map**



SOURCE: Features data from respondents' answers to the following PARTNER network survey question: From the list, select organizations/programs/departments with which you have an established relationship (either formal or informal).



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