In February 2013 the Center for Medicare and Medicaid Innovation (CMMI) awarded Minnesota a State Innovation Model (SIM) testing grant of over $45 million to use across a four-year period. The goal is to help its providers and communities work together to create healthier futures for Minnesotans. Minnesota’s SIM initiative is a joint effort between the Department of Human Services (DHS) and the Department of Health (MDH) with support from Governor Mark Dayton’s office.

Minnesota is using the grant money to test new ways of delivering and paying for health care using the Minnesota Accountable Health Model framework. Thanks to SIM funding, dedicated programs are now in place to improve health in Minnesota communities, provide better care to our state’s residents, and lower health care costs by expanding patient-centered, team-based care through service delivery and payment models that support integration of medical care, behavioral health, long-term care and community prevention services.

On a brisk October afternoon in Northern Minnesota, five students cluster after school to chat, check in and warm up with a steamy cup of hot chocolate. These students are members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) support group at Ely Memorial High School, a program that meets for 25 minutes at the end of the school day twice a week. Led by a Family Resource Facilitator, this group provides LGBTQ students with a safe space to share stories, challenges, laughter and resources.

The Family Resource Facilitator position was developed as part of the Ely Area Community Care Team (CCT) care facilitation model to address the unmet needs of youth and families. In 2011, this CCT formed in order to identify and address gaps in care in Minnesota’s Northeast Iron Range communities. Over the past few years, this Care Team has partnered with 20 organizations in the Ely area to offer health care, behavioral health, education, government services and non-governmental social service resources to hundreds of residents in Northern Minnesota.

In 2013, the Ely Area Community Care Team was able to expand care even further when it secured funding from the Minnesota State Innovation Model (SIM) grant. With part of the money from this grant, the Ely Area CCT hired the Family Resource Facilitator and an additional Care Facilitator to work within the Essentia Health Clinic.

The Family Resource Facilitator is an employee of Ely Community Resource (ECR), a local youth and family service non-profit whose mission is to be a primary resource to Ely area youth and families and to help in
building a community equipped to make Ely a great place to grow up. By utilizing a person-centered care coordination model, this Facilitator provides tailored combinations of services to members of this remote, rural community and works to fill the gaps between services. The Family Resource Facilitator spends much of each day embedded in Ely Public Schools and is recognized by the district as part of the school team.

Recognizing that students’ struggles in school are often rooted in issues outside of the classroom, the Family Resource Facilitator provides support for students and families who are struggling with personal problems, educational problems, chemical abuse, and a wide range of other challenges. Students receive one-on-one attention, and families are often contacted in order to foster support in school and at home. Utilizing the network of partner organizations within the Ely Area Community Care Team, the Family Resource Facilitator connects students with appropriate resources and supports, and helps students tackle the issues that make it difficult for them to succeed.

For LGBTQ students in Ely public schools, support starts with a safe space to gather during school time. Sexual minority (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer or questioning) youth often face isolation, distress, and poor health outcomes as a result of discrimination, social stigma, violence, and victimization, according to the Minnesota Department of Health. Since the formation of the LGBTQ support group, Ely public school staff report significant reductions in truancy among this group of students, and students report that this support group gives them a reason to come to school in the morning and to stay through the end of the day.

Through building community and empowering students to succeed in school, the Ely Area Community Care Team moves beyond a clinical definition of health and continues to care for Northern Minnesota residents as whole people. By listening to the individual needs of populations and patients within the Ely area, the CCT strives to ensure that residents have the tools and resources they need in order to be a partner in their wellness, treatment and/or recovery goals. And sometimes, community conversation over a cup of hot cocoa can be just what the doctor ordered.