

Fostering Partnerships Between Child Welfare and Aging Systems to Improve Recognition of Support for Kin Caregivers

Introduction

An estimated 53 million Americans provide care for an older adult or someone living with illness or disability.¹ Family caregivers provide a wide range of services, such as transportation, food preparation, housekeeping and personal care, enabling care recipients to live at home or in the setting of their choice with dignity and independence. Without supportive services, nearly 62 percent of caregivers have suggested that the individual they care for would be living in a nursing home.² Additionally, there are at least 2.4 million children being raised by grandparents or other relative caregivers, serving as a safety net and providing care when children's parents are unable.³

This Action Guide is part of a series to help Aging Network organizations develop innovative caregiver services and supports that meet the needs of a growing population of caregivers.

A **family caregiver** is an adult family member or other individual who has a significant relationship with, and who provides a broad range of assistance to, an individual with a chronic or other health condition, disability or functional limitation. This includes any grandparent or relative adult who has primary responsibility for grandchildren or other children who cannot remain with their parents.⁴

Background on Kin Caregivers

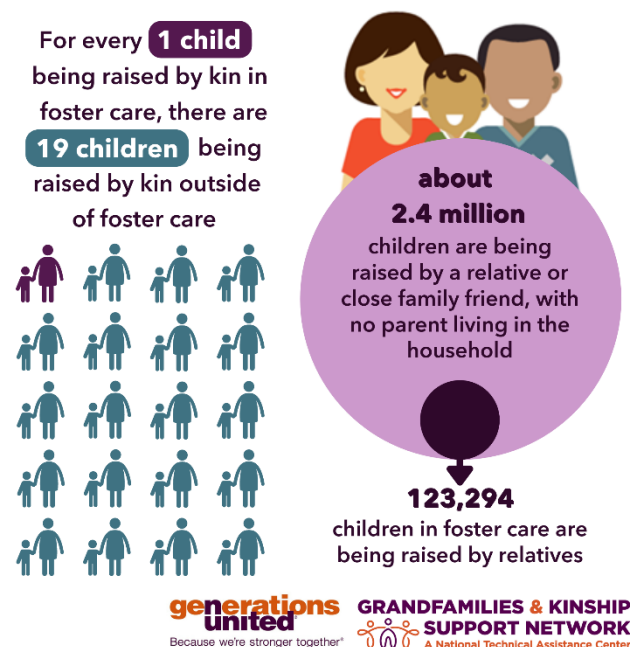
“Child Welfare” is an umbrella term used to describe the public child welfare or “foster care” system, including countless community organizations and nonprofits that work to ensure children are safe and parents have the support needed to care for them.

Kin caregivers, sometimes referred to as grandfamily caregivers, exist in all geographical regions and are in every socioeconomic bracket. Kin caregivers have unique strengths and challenges which must be considered when developing support services. Research repeatedly confirms that when a child cannot be raised with their parents, remaining with a relative or close family friend is the next best option. Compared to peers raised in unrelated out-of-home placements, children raised by kin caregivers have more placement stability, better behavioral and mental health outcomes and a stronger tie to their cultural identity and family customs.⁵

Kin caregivers also have a unique set of needs due to the way their family is formed. Often the children come to kin caregivers unexpectedly and in moments of parental crisis, which can cause caregivers financial hardships and raise other stressors, including challenges navigating family dynamic changes caused by shifting roles and responsibilities. Children removed from their parents often experience trauma and have mental health and other emotional needs.

Approximately one-third of all children in foster care systems around the country are placed with kin caregivers.⁶ This form of kinship care provides added support, such as a caseworker to help navigate complex behavioral and educational systems, as well as the opportunity for kin caregivers to be licensed as foster parents and receive access to ongoing financial support and a pathway to guardianship or adoption assistance. However, for every one child being raised by kin within the child welfare system, there are approximately 19 children raised by kin outside of the child welfare system, often meaning that grandparents or other kin made informal arrangements with the parents to care for a child when the need arose. These caregivers are provided with little to no formal support and are often left alone to navigate the array of challenges that accompany becoming a kin caregiver, including needing a court to grant a legal relationship.

Kin caregivers intersect with several government systems in the community, including education, Medicaid, housing, nutrition services and aging services. The intersection with aging services, specifically, is notable because approximately 59 percent of grandparents raising grandchildren are age 60 and older.⁷ Kin caregivers are best served by the systems they interact with when those systems collaborate, preventing duplication of services and ensuring resources are optimized. This guide is intended to highlight kin caregiver needs, elevate cross-system collaborations and provide tangible first steps for strengthening partnerships between the Aging Network and child welfare systems.



Case Example: Antoinette is a 55-year-old grandparent in Michigan who, with her husband, is raising two of her grandchildren. Her grandchildren are teenagers now, but she has been caring for them since birth, who came to live with her when a late-night call from the police warranted an immediate decision that would ultimately change her family's life. Initially, her biggest need was tangible items—a crib, diapers, bottles, formula and clothes. But eventually, she found and used additional services, such as support groups. Antoinette shared that her local Area Agency on Aging was incredibly helpful. They offered a range of resources, from gift cards to training sessions, and facilitated a support group for grandparents raising grandchildren, a resource Antoinette recalls as a lifeline. It provided both encouragement and practical resources to help navigate the emotional and physical demands of her new role. Antoinette knows her grandsons have a strong sense of connection and belonging due to being raised by a family member, but the transition to full-time caregiving was abrupt and overwhelming and would have been less stressful with more community support, such as financial assistance, emotional support and clear directions to secure tangible goods.

Action Steps

1. Explore innovative kinship program examples and resources.

There are several organizations engaging in collaborative work between aging and child welfare or working uniquely within the community to diminish stress and increase supportive services for kin caregivers. A selective list of programs is included below:

Program Name: Grandfamilies Stipend Program

Organization: Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging

Program Description: [Allegheny County Area Agency on Aging](#) joined forces with [A Second Chance, Inc.](#), to provide stipends to income-eligible kin caregivers who do not receive financial support from the child welfare system. This one-time \$1,000 stipend is provided to families if they are also connected to support services and parenting classes.

Learn More: www.asecondchance-kinship.com/grandfamiliesupport

Program Name: Kinship Navigator Program

Organization: Area Office of Aging of Northwestern Ohio, Inc.

Program Description: The [Area Office on Aging of Northwestern Ohio, Inc.'s \(AOoA\) Kinship Navigator Program](#) has served as a primary support to kin caregivers for more than 23 years. In 2000, the Kinship Navigator Program grew out of a statewide initiative by the state's child welfare agency—the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services—that sought to address the rising need to support kinship families. Since then, through strong local collaboration among the directors of the county's aging, child welfare and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families agencies, the Kinship Navigator Program at AOoA has been supporting kin caregivers and the children they raise through tangible goods, respite care, educational workshops and information and referral services.

Learn More: areaofficeonaging.com/programs

Program Name: Washington State Kinship Care Program

Organization: Washington State Aging and Long-Term Support Administration

Program Description: [The Washington State Kinship Navigator Program](#) was created in 2004 to serve kinship families throughout all of Washington State. Uniquely, this program is housed in the state's aging agency, the Aging and Long-Term Support Administration (AL TSA). The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families provides AL TSA with federal and state funding to support programming specifically for kinship families who are involved with the child welfare system, and additional funding comes from the governor's budget. In 2016, the state legislature began appropriating funds for seven federally recognized tribes to set up their own kinship navigator programs for their tribal members and for AL TSA to support this work.

Learn More: www.dshs.wa.gov/altsa/home-and-community-services-kinship-care/kinship-care

Program Name: Helping Grandparents Raising Grandchildren Program

Organization: Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma

Program Description: The [Helping Grandparents Raising Grandchildren](#) program is housed within the Healthy Aging section of the Choctaw Health Services Department, offering support to kin caregivers. The program offers a variety of services, including monthly respite care, transportation assistance, gardening supplies, clothing, day trips to museums or camps, back to school events, fishing supplies, legal services, daycare and more. The program holds an informal partnership with the local Boys & Girls Club. This relationship began with Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma simply visiting the Boys & Girls Club and leaving literature on kinship/grandfamilies, showing that cross-system support does not need to be complicated. Kinship programming is funded through a mix of federal and tribal funds. To be eligible for services, the caregiver must be at least 55 years of age, the caregiver and/or the child must have a Certificate of Degree of Indian Blood, the caregiver and child must be related by blood, and they must live within the Choctaw Nation reservation boundaries.

Learn More: www.choctawnation.com/services/healthy-aging

A review of the [National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers: Actions for States, Communities, and Others](#) also is recommended. The publication lists actions child welfare systems can take to improve their outreach to, engagement with and support of kin caregivers. Several of these actions also may help the Aging Network take first steps towards supporting the child welfare system in the delivery of kinship programming.

2. Develop equitable written policies and protocols that recognize the unique circumstances of kinship/grandfamilies.

In 2022, the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (which is funded by the U.S. Administration for Community Living) organized a series of six virtual convenings at which system leaders and lived experts from five regions of the country and multiple Tribes came together to address challenges and to explore promising practices for supporting kinship/grandfamilies. Following these convenings, a [resource of findings](#) was developed. Included in this resource are considerations for creating equitable policies, such as serving all kinship/grandfamilies regardless of child welfare involvement and [authentically engaging caregivers](#) in the development of policies.

Additionally, to better support the Aging Network, the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network, in partnership with USAging, created a guide titled [Including Kinship/Grandfamilies in State and Area Plans on Aging](#). This guide highlights federal guidance on incorporating the needs of kinship/grandfamilies in area and state plans and gives examples of how some AAAs and state units on aging did so.

3. Create a strong community network to support kinship/grandfamilies.

Many kin caregivers are raising children not under the custody of child welfare but are still tasked with navigating child welfare and other government systems while also working through complex family dynamics. Additionally, many systems are siloed, meaning kin caregivers involved in one system may not be told about services offered by another system. These families, sometimes referred to as “informal kinship families,” have the same need for supportive services as those who are involved with the child welfare system; however, they are often overlooked in the development and delivery of services. The development of a strong community network is vital to provide in-depth support to these families.

There are three simple ways the Aging Network can support kin caregivers, regardless of their involvement with the child welfare system:

Support groups are a low-cost way to provide centralized support for kin caregivers to connect and share resources with each other. One caregiver noted that it was through attending a local support group that she learned about a driver’s education program to teach her grandchildren to drive. Other caregivers say that support groups provide a safe place to share some of the challenges of being a kin caregiver while connecting with others. For information about starting a support group, consider this [tip sheet](#) or view this webinar: [Support Groups: Recruiting, Retention and Everything in Between](#).

Respite care allows kin caregivers to receive a break, whether for a short time, such as an afternoon or a night out, or for a longer duration of time. [Direction Home of Eastern Ohio Kinship Support Program](#) provides extended respite care. In 2022, the program began as a six-week summer day camp, offering structured care for children at no cost to their caregivers. The program has since expanded to offer beds, clothing, health maintenance supplies, food vouchers and monthly support group meetings. For tips on starting a respite program, consult this [Toolkit for Starting a Kin Caregiver Respite Program](#).

Concrete goods, such as cribs, car seats, diapers, food and school supplies, help alleviate urgent needs. The [Shelby County Relative Caregiver Program](#) in Memphis, TN, provides concrete goods to caregivers to help them maintain stability. The program also provides financial assistance to help cover payments for rent/mortgage, utilities, childcare and more. To receive financial assistance, a family cannot receive any other kinship payment or subsidy. The program also provides or connects families to basic essentials, such as food, clothing, medicine, school supplies and more. Read about this program on the program’s website or in the [Exemplary Program profile](#) from the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network.

Conclusion

Kin caregivers work tirelessly to provide normalcy, stability and safety for the children they care for, but they do not always receive adequate support services. This is due to a variety of reasons, including scarce resources in their geographical area, lack of awareness of available resources or ineligibility for supportive services. There is an increased need to provide support for kinship families. If the Aging Network and child welfare system can work in tandem to provide streamlined outreach and support services, kinship/grandfamilies will be better supported.

Additional Resources

The action steps provided in this guide are brief and intended to be a starting point for Aging Network organizations hoping to better serve kinship families. There is an ever-growing [bank of resources](#) and research available on kinship care, and more are being added. The following resources are available at no cost to professionals or other community members who would like to learn more:

[Generations United](#), an organization committed to improving the lives of children, youth and older adults, gathered and manages a group of more than 80 kin caregiver advocates known as [GRAND Voices](#), who advocate for and shape practices and policies that support kinship/grandfamilies.

The [Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network](#) at Generations United has a resource library with more than 120 original resources to help you better serve kinship families. Among the many resources available, the specific publications below from both the Network and Generations United can help with implementing ideas in this Action Guide:

- [Aging Network Services and Supports for Kin/Grandfamily Caregivers](#)
- [Grandfamilies 101—a 90-Minute Workshop for Organizations Partnering With Grandfamilies](#)
- [Grandfamily Support Groups: 7 Tips for Getting Started](#)
- [Kinship/Grandfamilies: The Role of Area Agencies on Aging and Title VI Native American Aging Programs](#)
- [Kinship/Grandfamily Provider Resource Guide](#)
- [Southwest Idaho Area Agency on Aging's Kinship Program: A Holistic Support for the Whole Family](#)
- [What Is a Grandfamily or Kinship Family?](#)

For further guidance on supporting kin caregivers, consider requesting [no-cost technical assistance](#) from the Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center.

Acknowledgements

USAging would like to thank the Caregiving Action Guide Workgroup comprised of Bryn Ceman, Greater Wisconsin Agency on Aging Resources, Inc.; Charlotte Stephenson, Lived Expert; Connor Callahan, ADvancing States; Jane DeBroux, Dane County Area Agency on Aging; Leland Kiang, USAging; Nancy Mendoza, Ohio State University School of Social Work; Tacia Spooner, Georgia Division of Children and Family Services; Robyn Wind, Generations United, with support from GU staff Melissa Devlin and Kylee Craggett, for their major contributions that helped shape this Action Guide.

References

- ¹ AARP and NAC (2020). [Caregiving in the U.S. 2020–AARP Research Report](#).
- ² Administration for Community Living (2014). [National Family Caregiver Support Program](#).
- ³ The Annie E. Casey Foundation (2021–2023). Accessed September 2024. [Kids Count Data Center: Children in Kinship Care in the United States](#).
- ⁴ Administration for Community Living (2022). [National Strategy to Support Family Caregivers](#).
- ⁵ Hartwell-Walker, Marie (2015). "[Challenges and Benefits for Grandparent Caregivers](#)." Psych Central.
- ⁶ Administration for Children and Families (March, 2024). [Foster Care and Analysis Reporting System: AFCARS Report #30 | The Administration for Children and Families](#).
- ⁷ United States Census Bureau (2021). Accessed February 2024. [Grandchildren, Grandparents and Their Coresident Grandchildren](#).

This project is supported by the Administration for Community Living (ACL), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) as part of a financial assistance award totaling \$4,400,000 with 75 percentage funded by ACL/HHS and \$1,476,288 and 25 percentage funded by non-government source(s). The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, ACL/HHS, or the U.S. Government.