

Engaging and Supporting Kinship Caregivers



FAMILY TIES: ANALYSIS FROM A STATE-BY-STATE SURVEY OF KINSHIP CARE POLICIES



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ABOUT THE ANNIE E. CASEY FOUNDATION

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A comprehensive survey of kinship care policies, fielded in 2022 for the Annie E. Casey Foundation by Child Trends, has found that although states have many strong policies in place to identify, notify and support kinship caregivers, there are some notable gaps and differences. The survey explored strategies used by state child welfare agencies to connect and partner with kinship caregivers. The survey asked child welfare administrators about policies governing notification of kin when a child enters foster care, strategies such as family team meetings and kinship navigation services that help caregivers find and obtain needed resources. State policies require different strategies for notifying kin when a child enters foster care. Also, in many states, kinship navigation services are not available for all kin caregivers. The survey's findings can help state leaders as they seek to increase placements with kin and use federal funds for strengthening kinship care support and services, which ultimately benefit children who need safe homes.

Kinship care is a critical resource for children and youth who are in foster care or at risk of entering foster care. Relatives and close family friends — known as kin — can provide a safe and stable home to help children and youth stay connected to their parents, communities and schools. Research finds that living with kin is associated with better outcomes than placement in non-relative foster homes or congregate care settings.¹ Child welfare agencies increasingly rely on relatives and kin when a child cannot stay with a parent: Nationally, placements with kin for children in child welfare custody have risen 10% over the past 15 years.²

Efforts to find, inform and partner with kin when a child enters foster care vary by state.

Kin need and deserve timely information and productive, working relationships with caseworkers and child welfare agencies when they have been called upon to become caregivers. The agencies must provide kinship caregivers with information about the circumstances of the case, the child's needs and their options for connecting with the child and caregiving. Federal requirements, created in the Fostering Connections to Success and Increasing

Adoptions Act of 2008 (Fostering Connections), set minimum requirements for notifying relatives when a child enters foster care.³ States have implemented these requirements but engage in them differently. Communication gaps exist, with the timing of notification and what information is shared with caregivers and potential caregivers varying by state.

When a family is involved with the child welfare agency, family team meetings are a way to bring family members and child welfare professionals together to jointly make decisions in a case — to plan and partner with kin who can support the family and potentially be a child's caregiver. There are many different models of family team meetings, several of which have been evaluated by researchers.⁴

Across the country, communities are also increasingly investing in kinship navigator programs designed to help kinship caregivers, including those involved in the child welfare system and those outside the child welfare system, connect to services and resources to meet their individual needs. Many of these programs have been shown to be effective through evaluations. Depending on location, these services may be available to caregivers who are

Family Ties: Analysis From a State-by-State Survey of Kinship Care Policies

In 2022, the Annie E. Casey Foundation asked Child Trends to field a written survey of child welfare agency administrators to understand policies that guide states' work with relatives and close family friends of children who come to the attention of the child welfare system. This kinship policy survey invited administrators to define "policies" broadly to include statutes, agency regulations and other written policy guidance related to kinship care. Agencies in the 50 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico received the 2022 survey. Forty-six completed it.⁵ The 2022 survey updates and expands on the findings of a similarly comprehensive survey conducted in 2007.⁶

To read overall findings from the survey and other briefs in the series, please visit www.aecf.org.

Key Definitions

There are many ways that state agencies can identify kinship caregivers and help them connect with children and services. This brief explores the availability of four different strategies:



Identification. Policies that guide when and how a child welfare agency identifies relatives and close family friends who may serve as resources or placement for a child who is at risk of entering foster care or who has been removed from the custody of their parents.



Notification. Policies that prescribe what information must be shared with relatives and close family friends once they have been identified.



Family team meetings. Facilitated meetings that bring together parents, relatives, family friends, caseworkers and agency staff designed to engage families in decision making around a specific case. A number of models exist, including Team Decision Making, Family Group Decision Making and Family Team Conferences.



Kinship navigator programs. Available in many jurisdictions for both kinship caregivers involved with the child welfare system and outside the child welfare system, navigators help kin connect to needed services and support. Models vary, with some providing mainly information and referrals, while others include more intensive and ongoing support.

directly connected to the child welfare system or, more broadly, to any relatives or kin caring for a child regardless of their system involvement.

Federal funds have supported the implementation of kinship navigator programs in several ways. For example, the 2018 federal Family First Prevention Services Act allows jurisdictions to receive Title IV-E funds for up to half of their expenditures for qualifying programs that help families navigate kinship care arrangements.⁷ More recently, in June 2024, the federal Children’s Bureau issued guidance for jurisdictions to use flexible Title IV-B funds for kinship navigator services, noting that appropriations were set at \$10 million for fiscal year 2024, down from \$20 million in prior appropriations.⁸

New data show areas of policy strength and gaps.

The survey specifically asked child welfare administrators⁹ about their policies to identify,

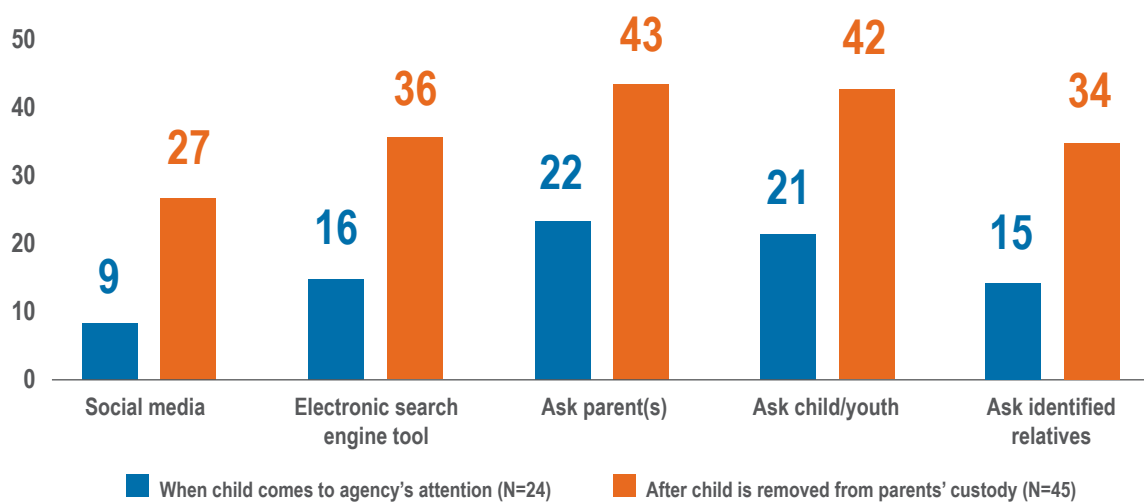
notify and engage with family members. Overall, the survey yielded a positive set of findings, with some states going beyond federal requirements to connect with kin in several ways. However, there are also notable gaps in the information shared and methods used for connecting with kin and in the availability of kinship navigation services. Findings in this brief can be used to help shape even stronger policies that give kin the information and resources they need to support children, youth and families.

THE 2022 SURVEY FINDINGS

Notification of relatives continues to expand.

Over the past two decades, federal and state legislation has promoted placement with relatives for children who are in foster care. Since passage of Fostering Connections, federal law has required child welfare agencies to notify adult relatives

Figure I: Number of states that reported diligent search methods are employed when searching for relatives



SOURCE: The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2022 kinship care policy survey, with analysis by Child Trends.

within 30 days of a child entering foster care.¹⁰ States have flexibility in how they define relative.

The 2007 survey on kinship care policies, fielded prior to passage of the law, found most states already had policies that instructed workers to seek out kin as placement and permanency options at the time a child entered care.

The 2022 survey found that some states have exceeded the minimum federal requirements. Twelve states¹¹ required relatives be notified more quickly than the 30-day requirement, including six states that required relatives to be notified immediately or as soon as possible. In 20 states, documentation of a relative's relationship to the child or family is required as part of the decision-making process in determining who to notify about a child's removal.¹²

The 2022 survey also asked about state policies requiring the identification and notification of relatives when a child comes to the attention of the agency but has not entered foster care. Twenty-seven states require relatives to be identified under these circumstances. Nearly all those states (25) identify relatives with the goal of providing support to a parent or other adult relative. Twenty-one report identifying relatives for potential caregiving and 19 states identify relatives to invite them to a family team meeting.

**Data tables presenting select state-level detail supplement this brief.*

States have expanded the types of search activities they use to identify relatives.

In the 2007 survey, states reported a variety of strategies used to search for relatives. The 2022 findings show continued and expanded use of methods to identify relatives, both prior to and after children have been removed from their parents' custody.

Among the 24 states that require identification of relatives when a child comes to the attention of the child welfare agency, many require that caseworkers to ask parents (22 states) or children (in 21 states) for contact information for relatives or others who could be a caregiver for the child. Fifteen states require caseworkers to ask identified relatives about additional family members and kin who could be placement options. In addition to asking individuals connected to a child's case, caseworkers use digital technologies to search for relatives: 16 states use a search engine tool, such as Accurant, Seneca or the Federal Parent Locator Service, and nine states require that caseworkers look for relatives on social media.

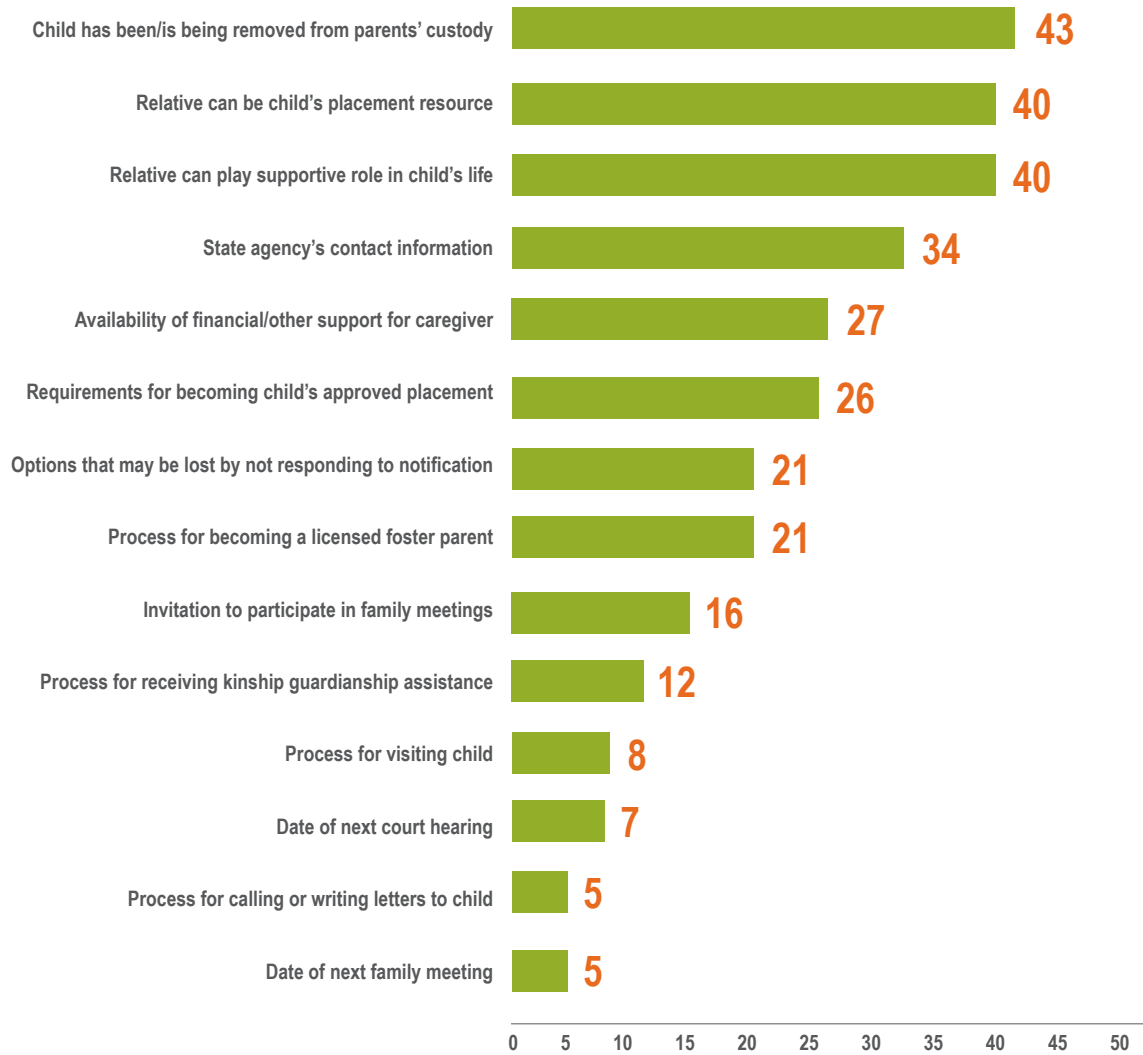
Forty-four of the 45 states that answered this question require search activities after the child has been removed from the parents' custody. Almost all states require caseworkers to ask parents (43) or children (42) about potential placement options. In 34 states, caseworkers ask relatives themselves about any other supportive adults in a child's life. Thirty-six states reported that they use digital search engines and 27 states use social media during their searches. All states who responded to the survey (46) reported conducting search activities across state lines.

States' most common method for notifying relatives is through the mail.

Although it is encouraging to see robust methods for identifying kin, states differ in how kin are notified and what information the notice contains. The survey asked states to select their required methods for notifying kin. Twenty-seven states required relatives to be notified by mail, 12 states required notification by email and 13 states required caseworkers to notify relatives by phone. Sixteen states did not require a particular method of notification.

The notices provided to kin are an opportunity for states to deliver important information. For example, about half of states included information about how to become a licensed caregiver or explained the

Figure 2: Information included in notifications to relatives



SOURCE: The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2022 kinship care policy survey, with analysis by Child Trends.

Team Decision Making (TDM)

Team Decision Making (TDM) is a family team meeting approach developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. During a TDM meeting, a trained facilitator brings together parents, children, agency staff, relatives and community members before a child has been removed from their home and whenever there is a safety concern. Through TDM meetings, all parties work together to understand the family's strengths and create a plan to support families and keep children safe..¹³

Child Trends conducted an evaluation of the TDM model to identify whether it improves outcomes for families.¹⁴ When workers identified a significant safety concern with a family, they referred the case to be randomly assigned to receive either a TDM meeting or services as usual. Over the course of the evaluation, 709 cases (with 1,423 children) were included in the study. For cases in which a TDM meeting was held, workers reported being better informed and were more likely to have sufficient information by which to make a decision or recommendation regarding the child's need to leave home compared to workers with cases in which no TDM meeting was held. Importantly, children in the TDM group were less likely to be removed from the home within two weeks of study enrollment than children in families with no TDM meeting, and the children were no more likely to have a subsequent allegation of maltreatment.

Weaving It All Together: Connecting With Kin in Connecticut

Kinship caregiving practice and policy in Connecticut have changed dramatically in recent decades. The Annie E. Casey Foundation has supported this change since 2010 and continues that work today. The state's investment in prioritizing kinship caregivers and better partnering with kin has helped reduce the number of group home placements by 57%. Now, over one-third of children in foster care are placed with kinship caregivers. The agency adopted a new practice model, called Strengthening Families, that helped staff better respect and engage with families. The state also began implementing Team Decision Making, which allows family members to help make decisions about safety planning and placement. Messaging campaigns around the importance of engaging those with a close understanding of a family's needs and the child's best interest and identifying policy barriers to kinship caregiving helped support the change. Beyond increasing placements with kin, the state also has seen a dramatic decrease in the number of children entering foster care, from 6,081 children in care in January 2011¹⁵ to 3,121 in December 2023.¹⁶

To read more, go to www.aecf.org/resources/the-connecticut-turnaround.

implications of not responding. Fewer than 10 states described the process for visiting or writing to the child or provided the date of the next court hearing or family team meeting in their notice.

Figure 2 (see page 5) provides a comprehensive picture of what states included in the notifications sent to relatives and how many states reported sharing the information.

Only about half of states collect any data about relative notification, including whether a relative responded to the notice.

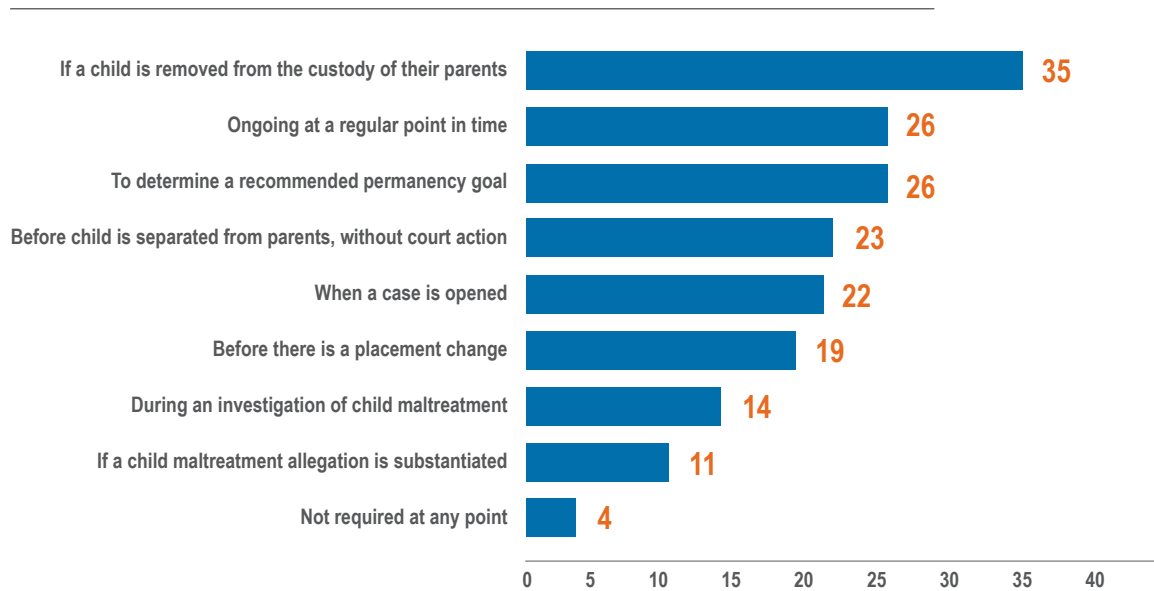
About half of states (23) reported they track data about relative notifications, and two additional states shared that data may be tracked but that tracking is not required. The states that do track data include relatives' contact information, dates and methods of contact, and any responses. Thirteen states reported they collect data on relative notifications

for cases in which the child has not been removed from their parents' custody. The resulting lack of data prevents states from learning how well notification processes are working and which notification vehicles (such as mail, email or phone) are most effective for connecting with kin.

In all but four responding states, family team meetings are required at some point during child welfare involvement.

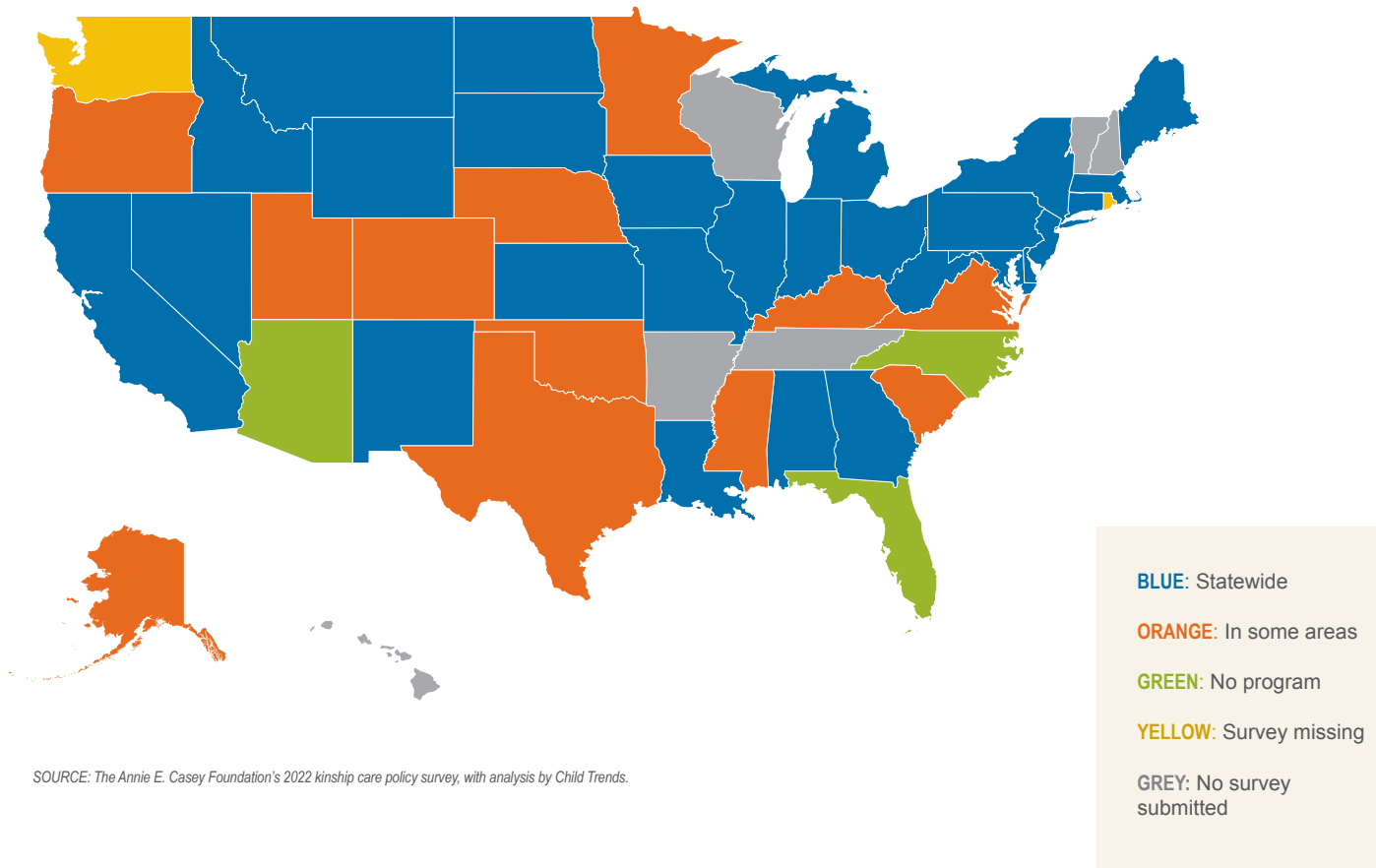
An encouraging number of states (42) reported requiring some type of family team meeting. Family team meetings are a strategy that child welfare agencies use to bring families and professionals together to jointly make decisions in a child welfare case. Including relatives in these meetings — both those serving as caregivers and those who provide other types of support — can help children and families get the resources they need and keep children safe.

Figure 3: States required family team meetings to be held at various points during a family's involvement with the child welfare agency.



SOURCE: The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2022 kinship care policy survey, with analysis by Child Trends.

Figure 4: States that administer a kinship navigator program



SOURCE: The Annie E. Casey Foundation's 2022 kinship care policy survey, with analysis by Child Trends.

Sixteen states use the Team Decision Making model developed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation and evaluated by Child Trends. Other frequently used models are Family Group Decision Making (eight states) and Family Group Conferencing (seven states). Invitees to family team meetings include parents (40 states); the child (38 states); relatives or fictive kin, meaning close family friends (37 and 36 states, respectively); the caseworker (40 states); and the caseworker's supervisor (36 states).

KINSHIP NAVIGATOR PROGRAMS

Most states have a kinship navigator program, but many of these programs are not available statewide or to all kinship caregivers.

Kinship navigator programs provide information and referrals to services that help meet the needs of the caregivers and the children in their care. Although programs vary, generally navigators are available to answer questions that kin may have — such as how to enroll a child in school or get legal custody. They can also refer kin to needed services such as mental and physical health programs, public benefits or support groups.¹⁷

Kinship navigator programs are associated with higher rates of stability, permanent care arrangements and increased safety for children, and some studies have found that caregivers report the programs successfully meet their needs.¹⁸ The federal Family First Prevention Services Act authorizes Title IV-E agencies to obtain federal reimbursement for up to 50% of their expenditures for eligible kinship navigator programs.¹⁹ In addition to including certain components, such as coordination with other agencies and providing outreach to families, eligible programs must be rated as at least “promising” by the federal Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse.²⁰

In the 2022 survey, 40 states reported having a kinship navigator program (Figure 4). Twenty-eight

states' programs are available statewide and 12 states' programs are only available in some areas. Twenty-two states administer a program through a community partner, while in 12 states, the child welfare agency administers the program. The remaining four states administer their programs through other means, such as another state agency (not child welfare), or through local child welfare agencies in some jurisdictions and contracted community partners in others. Of the 22 states that administer their kinship navigator program through a community partner, nearly all (21 states) provide the community partner with financial support.²¹

It is important to note there have been changes in states since the survey was administered, and some states may have programs that were not reported on the survey because they are administered outside of the child welfare system. For example, Florida has kinship navigator programs — some of which provide services beyond information or referrals, including peer support, mental health and legal services.²² Utah's kinship navigator program also was recently implemented statewide.²³

Encouragingly, most states with kinship navigator programs make services available broadly and do not limit eligibility to families involved with the child welfare agency (32 states). This means services are available to a much broader group of families and not limited to those families in which children in the caregiver's home are involved in a child protective services investigation or have an open case with the child welfare agency.

When program staff are kinship caregivers themselves, this can help caregivers understand and access services while also helping to build trust and understanding. The survey asked the 12 states that administer the programs through their child welfare agency whether they employ peer caregivers. Only four states hired peer kinship navigators, although two additional states said they planned to hire peers for their kinship navigator programs in the future.

HALOS Kinship Navigation Model

Although some kinship navigator programs focus primarily on information and referrals, others go beyond, providing intensive and ongoing support to kinship caregivers. For example, HALOS in South Carolina provides services based on families' needs as identified through a home visit. Services include financial assistance, trauma-based education, free legal advice, other concrete resources such as car seats and school supplies, and regular meetings with families to check in on progress and other needs. The Annie E. Casey Foundation provided funding to HALOS to create an operations manual and incorporate best practices into the model.

Learn more about the HALOS model at www.charlestonhalos.org/our-services.

When the 2022 survey was fielded, only one kinship navigator program was approved for the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse. Therefore, the survey asked agencies whether they received or plan to seek Title IV-E reimbursement for their kinship navigator programs — 25 states said they would. Three additional states shared that they may seek Title IV-E reimbursement in the future but noted their kinship navigator program had not yet been evaluated for inclusion in the list of eligible programs for reimbursement in the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse. When the 2022 survey was conducted, two states had not yet decided whether to seek reimbursement for their kinship navigator programs.

CONCLUSION

The identification and notification of relatives continues to be an area of strength across states. Even before the federal Fostering Connections Act was implemented, child welfare agencies were striving to engage relatives and kin as resources for children who could not stay with their parents.

That momentum has only grown. With every state providing notices to relatives, some earlier than others and sooner than federally required, and with nearly every state requiring family team meetings, there have been tremendous advances in engaging kin who can provide support to a family during a time of crisis.

The survey also sheds light on some ways that these policies could be even stronger. The findings highlight strategies to improve the mechanisms for notifying kin and the information that could be added to the notification. This is an important opportunity to reduce the time a child waits for a secure and loving placement. Placing a child with kin immediately is critical. States' primary notification method, dependent on the mail, may be too slow and typically lacks any way to prove that kin have in fact received the notice. Similarly, lack of information, such as how to become a kinship foster parent or what financial resources are available, may make it difficult for relatives and kin to understand how they can engage in the process to help a child, become a licensed kinship foster parent or learn what resources, services and support are available to them.

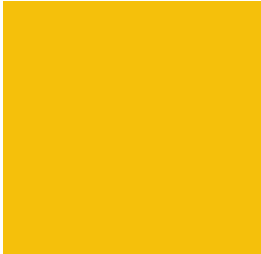
Only five kinship navigator programs are approved by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse, meaning that agencies must rely on state or other federal funds for ongoing support of programs that remain unreviewed or unapproved.²⁴ Kinship navigator programs face several hurdles in qualifying for the clearinghouse, such as unique challenges in applying traditional evaluation methods to the model²⁵ and the prohibitive costs of evaluations for smaller, community-based programs.

Investments in kinship navigator programs — at both the state and federal levels — show a promising commitment to ensure kin are connected to the support they need. Expanding these investments to reach every kinship caregiver — by including those who are not involved with the child welfare system and providing programs in the communities where caregivers live — is a critical next step. Tools like the *Kin-Finding Toolkit*, developed by Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network and Child Welfare Playbook, can help agencies identify and implement new ways to find and engage with kin.²⁶

Federal funding outside of Family First must continue to be available for agencies to provide navigator services while programs are being evaluated. Federal investments also should include funding for evaluation, which must be stable for multiple years so that appropriate studies can be designed and conducted.

As states strive to increase placements with kinship caregivers, engaging with kin in meaningful ways is an important step in improving the chances of making and maintaining connections for children in care. Kin who serve as caregivers or provide ongoing support to a family in other ways should be consulted by agencies as they refine their policies and processes. Resources such as *Tips to Include Kinship/Grandfamilies in Programmatic Decision Making* can help leaders understand how

to involve kin in policy development.²⁷ These kin are well positioned to share effective methods of communication and engagement strategies that will strengthen states' kinship policies and help peers understand how to work with the child welfare agency.



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