



think of us

Driving Systems Change
in Child Welfare

Kin, First and Foremost

Challenges, Opportunities, and the Path Forward for Kinship Care

October 2024

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Introduction

The term “kinship care” refers to a child being raised by people they know and trust, like relatives, close family friends, and other supportive adults in a child’s life. Extensive research shows that kinship care provides benefits and better outcomes for children in foster care.¹ Indeed, kinship care is the preferred placement for children who must be removed from their parents because it helps maintain the children’s connections with their families and communities, increases stability in school attendance and other socio-emotional development factors, and minimizes the trauma of family separation.

By studying how states and counties across the United States navigate common pain points for kinship care, we can identify kin-first experiences, policies, and practices that allow more children to grow up safely with people who know and love them. We define any practice or policy that youth, families, and professionals in the child welfare system describe as encouraging of successful kinship care as a “kin-first practice.”

From August 2022 to August 2023, we embarked on a research study to:

- Identify the cultural, experiential, and institutional strengths and challenges of kinship care in select counties in California, Indiana, and New Hampshire through on-the-ground field research with 255 youth, parents, and kin, as well as the 140 agency staff, 93 service providers, and 41 legal professionals that work with them; and
- Compile existing kin-first practices through a landscape review and subject-matter expert interviews.

Purpose of this Report

For decades, researchers and practitioners have studied the intersection of kinship care—a practice that extends beyond (and long predates) foster care—and the child welfare system. Countless studies, evaluations, and reports have highlighted the importance of kinship care and promising practices for utilizing and supporting kin. In publishing this report, Think of Us seeks to contribute to this robust literature by focusing on elevating first-hand experiences and voices that are rarely centered—those of children and families impacted by the system and the frontline professionals who work in the field. This study focused on understanding the direct experiences of participants and, accordingly, this report intends to complement existing literature, not replace it.

¹ For a systematic review of the literature, please see Winokur, M., Holtan, A., & Batchelder, K.E. (2014). [Kinship care for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children removed from the home for maltreatment: A systematic review](#). Campbell Systematic Reviews, 10: 1-292.

To inform the lines of inquiry in our primary research, Think of Us conducted a non-exhaustive landscape review of existing literature. Throughout the report, there are citations to relevant studies and reports, but these citations do not and are not meant to represent the full extent of the literature. In some instances, the recommendations and insights provided by individuals interviewed support conventional wisdom and the literature; in others they deviate. When there are deviations or contradictions, we see opportunities to probe deeper and challenge assumptions.

New kin-specific licensing federal rule

This research comes at an important inflection point for the role of kinship care within the child welfare continuum. On February 14, 2023, the United States Administration for Children and Families published a [notice of proposed rulemaking](#) for a new draft rule that would allow title IV-E agencies to create kin-specific processes for licensing and approving kin.² The rule received overwhelming support during its comment period, including support from 23 states, bi-partisan leadership in Congress, multiple tribes, and numerous nonprofit organizations and philanthropies focused on child welfare. The final rule was published on September 28, 2023.

The final rule grants new flexibility for states and tribes that operate their own title IV-E agencies to substantially shift the child welfare model. Prior to the new rule, regulations mandated child welfare agencies to apply a single set of licensure and approval requirements to both kin and non-kin foster parents. This presented serious challenges for states and tribes wanting to recognize the unique context of kin caregivers, which arises from their circumstances and their existing relationship with the child. Though states have authority to waive certain requirements that do not impact child safety, this must be done on a case-by-case basis, placing a heavy bureaucratic burden on state and tribal child welfare systems.

Having only a single set of licensure requirements for kin and non-kin foster families has resulted in several outcomes:

- Child welfare agencies spend substantial amounts of extremely limited funds and staff time to help kin families meet onerous non-safety approval or licensure standards (e.g., home requirements like recycling, well water testing, water temperature limits, pet registration);³

² Administration for Children and Families (2023). [Separate licensing standards for relative or kinship foster family homes](#). Federal Register.

³ In private interviews conducted with state child welfare officials regarding implementation of the new rule, several states reported that helping a single kin caregiver achieve licensure or approval cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000 in resources and staff time. Officials indicated that a kin-specific licensure process could reduce the majority of these costs.

- Nationally, thousands of children are denied the opportunity to be placed with kin families because kin cannot overcome non-safety barriers to approval or licensure;
- Thousands more children live in kin foster homes that do not receive financial support for their care because caregivers are deemed suitable for placement but not approval or licensure;⁴
- Some states spend substantial amounts of money to provide financial support to kin caregivers, without receiving federal reimbursement.⁵

Under the new rule, states have the flexibility to create kin-specific approval and licensure standards that meet the unique needs and context of kin caregivers in their states. If states adopt these rules, thousands more children could live with people who know and love them, who are best positioned to help them thrive, and who receive equitable support for the child's care. It could reduce bureaucratic hurdles and unlock crucial federal funding allowing states to devote limited resources to important priorities like prevention and community-based services. If implemented well, the rule is a historic opportunity to align our values with our practices and advance toward a kin-first culture.

To aid child welfare agencies in establishing kin-specific standards, Think of Us and our partners at A Second Chance, Inc., American Bar Association Center on Children and the Law, Children's Rights, CWPolicy, Generations United and its Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center, National Indian Child Welfare Association, National Association for Regulatory Administration, and New America's Resource Family Working Group published [Kin-Specific Foster Home Approval: Recommended Standards of National Organizations](#). These model standards, produced with input from 45 title IV-E agencies and more than 100 kin caregivers, are intended to help agencies develop and implement kin-specific standards and to fulfill the statutory requirement that licensing and approval standards be "reasonably in accord with recommended standards of national organizations."

How to read this report

The report is structured around five main categories of kinship care practices:

⁴ According to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) data published in the notice of proposed rulemaking, as of September 30, 2019, title IV-E foster care payments were being made on behalf of 36,953 children. This represents 27.7% of the 133,405 children placed with kin. ACF posits that, with kin-specific licensing standards, this number will likely rise to meet the overall title IV-E participation rate of 47.7% and that the agency "also assume[s] that the difference in the title IV-E participation rate of relatives and non-relatives is almost entirely due to the use of the same licensing or approval standard for both relative and non-relative foster family home placements."

⁵ Several states, including Michigan and Nebraska provide equitable financial support to kin caregivers regardless of their licensure status. When title IV-E funds are not available because a caregiver is not licensed, these states provide foster care maintenance payments with state funds or other federal funding streams, like the Social Services Block Grant, which could be utilized for other purposes if title IV-E funds were available.

1. **Cross-cutting practices:** This category includes practices that impact kinship care at all or various stages, including kin definition, operational and infrastructural considerations, and pervasive perceptions, beliefs, and ideas.
2. **Kin search and engagement:** This category includes practices for identifying and locating kin, informing them about the child's involvement with the child welfare system, and maintaining family and cultural connections with kin who do not serve as placement.
3. **Kin placement, approval, and licensing:** This category includes practices for prioritizing kin placements while lowering reliance on non-kin placements, improving interstate placement practices, and evaluating and approving kin for placement. It also addresses barriers that prevent families from being approved and licensed, practices for waiving non-safety requirements for kin, and support to help kin navigate the approval and licensure processes.
4. **Kin support:** This category covers various forms of assistance for kin, including guidance, financial support and stipends, child care, in-home and community resources for mental health support, family mediation, legal representation, and more, both before and after licensure.
5. **Kin permanency:** This category includes permanency options available to families, decision-making surrounding reunification with parents, legal guardianship, and adoption, as well as post-permanency support.

The above mentioned categories can be found in these sections of the report:

- **Summary of findings:** Including (i) a table summarizing barriers to kinship care, distinguishing between barriers originating in system policies and practices, and barriers stemming from the biases and beliefs of the different actors in the ecosystem; and (ii) another summarizing opportunities for kinship care, contrasting the recommendations suggested by participants in California, Indiana, and New Hampshire and the stipulations of the new flexibilities around kin-specific licensing and approval.
- **Detailed findings:** Each category presents findings from our field research, accompanied by case studies from our landscape review, and illustrated with quotes, stories, and photographs from California, Indiana, and New Hampshire.

A conclusion section follows the summary and detailed findings, and offers additional opportunities for reflection. Lastly, a description of the research methodology and a list of acronyms and abbreviations are provided in Appendices A and B.



Summary of findings

This section includes two tables: the first summarizes the barriers to kinship care that surfaced through our research, while the second compiles and summarizes recommendations for improving kinship care, as shared by participants throughout the research project. By taking advantage of the new federal flexibilities and establishing appropriate kin-specific licensure and approval standards, states can mitigate the need for many of these recommendations. See footnotes in this section for more detail.

Barriers to kinship care

1

Cross-Cutting Practices

Barriers in policies and practices

- There is a lack of information and misinformation about the meaning and value of kinship care, the unique needs of kin, and the policies and protocols in place to support them.
- Kin who are older, LGBTQIA+, or undocumented face unique challenges that may discourage or prevent them from pursuing formal kinship caregiving.
- Agency staff lack trauma-informed, culturally responsive, and age-appropriate communication skills when engaging with youth and families.
- Resources to offer interpretation and translation are not always available or up to par.
- Families may struggle with accessing or using technology, making it more difficult for kin to complete the approval and licensure process and access critical resources.
- Young people, parents, and kin are not consulted about important decisions that impact them and their case.
- Youth and families struggle to meet inflexible, time-consuming, and often unpredictable requirements of hearings, appointments, and programs they are asked to attend.

Mental model barriers (perceptions, beliefs, and ideas)

- Understanding of kin as only relatives by blood or marriage, rather than supportive adults in a child and family's life, can limit the identification and engagement of potential kin caregivers.
- Fear of system entanglement, lack of resonance with the term "kin," and wariness about disrupting current relationships or harming relatives' wellbeing can discourage families from seeking to become kin caregivers.
- Caseworker bias against families that don't ascribe to a two-parent, nuclear family structure can disqualify otherwise suitable kin from being seen as appropriate placements.
- Caseworker bias towards certain living situations conflates what they perceive to be a "good home" with a "safe home," potentially excluding suitable kin caregivers.
- Failure to meet system demands by youth and families is often penalized as a compliance issue rather than recognized as an access issue, making it more difficult for kin to be perceived as viable long-term placements.
- The system is set up to operationalize kinship care as providing individual and distinct support to youth, parents, and kin, rather than supporting them as a collective unit, which can destabilize placements.

2 Kin search and engagement

Barriers in policies and practices

- Heavy caseloads, departmental siloing, vague requirements, and lack of accountability measures and resources dedicated to kin search and outreach can lead to viable kin placements falling through the cracks.
- It's often easier and faster for agency workers to place a child with a known foster family than to invest time in finding kin, especially if the kin are out of state.
- Lack of incentives or reminders to reassess kin and high caseworker turnover means continuous kin search is not prioritized.
- Youth feel forced to build a case for the kin caregivers they wish to live with.
- Paternity requirements (e.g., DNA testing, marriage and birth certificates, and father status court interviews) hinder outreach to paternal relatives.

Mental model barriers (perceptions, beliefs, and ideas)

- The system perpetuates the harmful idea that "the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," implying that kin will share the same challenges parents had that were cause for removal, making them appear less suitable for placement.
- There is widespread bias against families with previous involvement with the child welfare system, often disqualifying siblings and other blood relatives from being considered as suitable placements.
- Kin who can't be approved immediately are less likely to be contacted again and reassessed due to the assumption that they will be unable to change their circumstances.
- Parents can be hesitant towards sharing names of kin due to feeling shame over losing custody of their children and/or fear or wariness of potentially complicating family dynamics.
- When kin engagement is focused solely on placement rather than cultivating a network of supportive adults for the child, it limits future placement options and general support for the family, as well as beneficial relationships for the child.
- The system assumes that it doesn't take a village to raise a child, and that individual support to kin who are unsupported by their community is sufficient.

3 Kin placement, approval, and licensing

⁶ *The research for this report was conducted prior to the finalization of the new federal rule and before any jurisdiction had the option to implement kin-specific licensing standards. Many of the barriers included in this subsection would be mitigated by effective uptake of these new flexibilities, which would reduce substantial structural inefficiencies, thereby freeing staff capacity to focus on other barriers.*

Barriers in policies and practices⁶

- Case managers are inconsistent in ensuring caseworkers have exhausted all avenues for kin placements before proceeding to a non-kin placement.
- Safety criteria for kin placements can be overly stringent, punitive, and not always aligned with the actual safety risks.
- Caseworkers have discretionary power to interpret policies when evaluating a kin placement, leaving the process vulnerable to potential caseworker bias.
- The process for kin to become licensed is extremely cumbersome, invasive, and time-consuming, and doesn't acknowledge the pre-existing relationship they share with youth.
- Approval and licensing requirements can be expensive, and put families into an even more precarious financial position.
- Approval and licensing requirements are particularly challenging for non-English speaking kin, kin with limited or no access to technology, kin in rural areas, low-income families, and hourly and seasonal workers.
- Housing and cost of living are profound structural challenges for kin wishing to serve as placements.
- There is insufficient financial support for kin to adapt their current living situations to meet home checks standards and cover other approval costs.
- Criminal background checks remain a major barrier for kin caregivers to be approved and licensed, and applications for criminal background exemptions can be lengthy and uncertain.
- Policies and practices for evaluating expunged crimes in background checks are inconsistent across states.
- Approval and licensure requirements must be waived on a case-by-case basis, adding a bureaucratic burden that disincentivizes caseworkers working with kin.
- Long wait times during the kin outreach, approval, and licensure processes can interrupt bonding between youth and kin, which is crucial to subsequent placement and permanency.
- Unreasonable caseloads incentivize agency staff to seek placements with institutions or non-kin foster parents rather than kin because it saves them time and work.
- Judicial discretion can favor non-kin placement and courts don't allow kin to advocate for themselves in court.
- Judges can be too quick to release youth to families who are not yet equipped to support their needs, risking harm to both youth and families.

Opportunities for kinship care

1

Cross-Cutting Practices

Agency policy

- Broadly define “kin” to include both relatives and other adults with a close, family-like relationship.⁷
- Ensure explicit agency leadership support is translated into corresponding policies, kinship care targets and measurement systems, and staffing structures.
- Establish a “culture of care,” where agencies prioritize youth and family perspectives in placements and case outcomes.
- Conduct community outreach efforts to raise awareness about kin caregiving opportunities, particularly in communities that share the youth’s cultural backgrounds.

Cultural competency

- Provide training, resources, and support that are tailored to the unique needs of different types of kin (e.g., older kin, young adults taking care of their younger siblings), as well as specialized training to help all kin navigate the unique complexities of kinship care.⁸
- Ensure all materials and processes are culturally responsive and adapted to families’ preferred language.
- Ensure procedures and resources are adapted to families’ technology access.

Staffing

- Train agency staff on the value of kin, their unique needs, and how to best meet those needs.
- Establish hiring practices that evaluate the willingness and ability of potential staff to prioritize and support kin.
- Cultivate anti-bias and cultural competency amongst caseworkers, and hire those with more personal and professional experience in the communities they serve, particularly those with lived experience in the system.

Courts

- Provide more education on the value and relevance of kinship care for courts and legal professionals.
- Offer more accessible court scheduling protocols for kin.
- Increase flexibility for families when expecting attendance to courts, community service providers, and other appointments.

⁷ We suggest utilizing a broad, culturally responsive definition like “Individuals related to a child by blood, marriage, tribal custom, and/or adoption and other individuals who have an emotionally significant relationship with the child or the child’s parents or other family members.”

⁸ Specialized training should be offered as a support to kinship families, not as a barrier to placement, approval, or licensure.

2

Kin search and engagement

Agency policy

- Implement new accountability policies to encourage kin search regularly, at every placement change, and before signing off on a non-kin placement.
- Use a case management system to integrate and track all information related to family finding and outreach.
- Create more flexible processes to establish paternity or reassess the necessity for court paternity requirements.
- Promote strategies that engage kin even if they are not placement options.

Staffing

- Dedicate staff, teams, and/or contracted units to kin search and outreach, from initial family engagement to the later stages of a case.⁹
- Invest in more training for how to gently engage with youth and families when asking about kin information and placement preferences.

Identification

- Involve families in the search process by asking parents, youth, kin, and using collaborative search methods.
- Leverage a broad range of sources for kin finding, including family team meetings, tools like social media, search engines, obituaries, government agency and public records databases, and by engaging with tribes.

3

Kin placement, approval, and licensing

Agency policy

- Have statutes in place that designate kin as presumptive placements.
- Emphasize the importance of kin placements to placement teams and direct them to exhaust all kin-options before non-kin placements.

⁹ While it will not mitigate the need for dedicated kin search and outreach teams, effective implementation of the new federal rule will greatly reduce the financial and staffing burden of the process. Implementing appropriate kin-specific licensing standards would ensure kin caregivers are not denied placement or support for non-safety reasons, meaning more placements would be available, and the subsequent accessibility of financial support would increase the likelihood of placement stability, resulting in decreased need for kin search. Additionally, appropriate kin-specific standards will result in a less onerous and invasive process, meaning potential kin caregivers will be more open to engaging with the agency.

- Require additional steps and/or senior sign-off and place added scrutiny and oversight for non-kin placements.
- Work with agency counsel to question motions for non-kin placements in court.
- Increase the opportunities for kin to exercise their voice in court, and for caseworkers to advocate for more appropriate kin placements.
- Organize pre-placement visits between youth and kin to maintain connection and bonding while awaiting approval and placement.

Approval and licensure requirements¹⁰

- Rethink approval and licensure requirements to better align with the realities of kinship care, particularly for requirements that do not impact the safety of children.
- Establish a list of potentially waivable approval and licensure requirements.
- Streamline and simplify home-related requirements.
- Socialize caseworkers on workarounds they can use to help kin pass criminal background checks.
- Revisit approval and licensure requirements to assess if they need to exist in the first place.
- Provide separate funding for kin to meet approval requirements (home repairs, fingerprinting fees, etc.).
- Frontload kin approval to minimize delays in motion changes for placement removal cases.

Interstate placements¹¹

- Implement practices that facilitate interstate placements, including conducting pre-interviews with kin and preliminary homes studies to reduce time to placement.
- Develop protocols for placing outgoing interstate cases where trans and queer youth move to states with restrictions on medical access and gender expression.

Staffing

- Create or partner with a kinship care team that focuses on guiding kin caregivers through the kinship care process.
- Provide more education to caseworkers on how to work with kin to get approved and licensed.

¹⁰ The research for this report was conducted prior to the finalization of the new federal rule and before any jurisdiction had the option to implement kin-specific licensing. We strongly recommend that all title IV-E agencies adopt kin-specific licensing standards in line with the model kin-specific foster home approval standards, which would reduce or eliminate the need to effect most of the recommendations below.

¹¹ As states and tribes adopt streamlined kin-specific licensing standards, the variations between licensing requirements will decrease, which should reduce the administrative burden of interstate placements, particularly if new licensing requirements align closely with the model standards.

4

Kin support

Staffing

- Invest in dedicated kinship care units and kinship service providers to work with kin from the moment of removal and provide ongoing resource support.
- Provide education to caseworkers on how to understand and address the unique ongoing needs of kin caregivers, including resource and relational needs.
- Invest in building or expanding robust kinship navigator programs to help connect kin to resources and support available to them in the community.

Financial support¹²

- Ensure financial support is offered to kin caregivers immediately upon placement.
- Create streamlined processes to offer upfront financial support to ensure kin caregivers have the resources necessary to take placement (food, emergency supplies, bedding, etc.).
- Minimize the need for complicated and lengthy reimbursement processes by providing upfront financial support to kin.
- Provide equal financial and resource support to licensed and unlicensed kin caregivers.

Non-financial resources

- Provide kin with comprehensive guidebooks on how to navigate the kinship care process.
- Provide a continuum of resources and services for kin, including basic needs, strong networks of kin caregivers, parenting classes and training, comprehensive family mental health support, specialized and consistent support for children with high support needs, wraparound and preventative services, and legal support and representation.

5

Kin permanency

- Provide upfront clarity to kin about the range of permanency options available to them and about the requirements for each option.¹³

¹² By adopting kin-specific licensing standards, title IV-E agencies can make it possible for all kin caregivers to receive foster care maintenance payments and other supports provided to licensed and approved caregivers quickly, preferably starting on the first day of placement. This will mitigate many of the needs of kin caregivers, allowing caseworkers to focus on more complex needs. By doing away with onerous and invasive processes, adopting kin-specific standards could smooth tensions between caregivers and the agency, making kin more likely to proactively seek support before a crisis.

¹³ In order to be eligible for the title IV-E Guardianship Assistance Program, a caregiver must be licensed for six months prior to guardianship, which presents a major impediment for caregivers who want to take permanency, given substantial barriers and long timelines for licensure. By implementing the new rule and adopting appropriate kin-specific licensing and approval standards, this barrier could be mitigated, allowing states to exit children to guardianship when appropriate for the child.

- Invite parents, kin, and youth (if old enough) to child and family team meetings to discuss and make permanency plans.
- Conduct pre-permanency planning to identify the support needs of parents and/or kin caregivers and offer support post-permanency.

Detailed findings

This section provides a detailed summary of the findings from our field research, and describes the barriers kin caregivers experience through the kinship care process as well as recommendations for how to improve kinship policy and practice. This section includes quotes, stories, and photographs from the research sessions conducted in California, Indiana, and New Hampshire, as well as case studies from our landscape review.

1. Cross-cutting practices

In this section:

- *Being inclusive of a wide range of potential kin caregivers*
 - ↳ *Definition of “kin”*
 - ↳ *Kin caregiver mental models about kinship care*
 - ↳ *Community outreach*
- *Building a supportive ecosystem and infrastructure*
 - ↳ *Explicit agency leadership support*
 - ↳ *Agency staffing structures and staff competencies*
 - ↳ *Language and accessibility*
 - ↳ *Court system buy-in and accessible court procedures*
 - ↳ *Requirements that don't promote child safety*
- *Centering families and communities*
 - ↳ *Family-centered casework*
 - ↳ *Preconceived notions of what a “suitable” family looks like*

1.1. Being inclusive of a wide range of potential kin caregivers

One strategy to encourage kinship care is to ensure that a wide range of supportive adults and families have the potential to become kin caregivers.

Definition of “kin”

Promoting kinship care relies on broadly defining the word “kin” to include a range of relatives and non-relative supportive adults in a child or young person’s life. For example, the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) defines kinship care as “the full-time protecting and nurturing of children by grandparents, aunts, uncles, godparents, older siblings, non-related extended family members, and anyone to whom children and parents ascribe a family relationship.”¹⁴ Including adults with a significant relationship to the child or the child’s family in the definition of kin honors the strong personal bonds children create with adults other than relatives by blood or marriage. For the youth we talked to during this project, this included people like their coaches, teachers, and parents in their peer friends group. This expansive definition also acknowledges the enduring relationships children have with former affinity relatives post-divorce or separation. To ensure that children are placed with people who can care for and support them, the inclusion of non-relative kin should be defined both in policy

¹⁴ Child Welfare League of America. (n.d.), [Kinship care](#).

and in how it is understood by those responsible for interpreting it, including professionals working inside and outside the child welfare system.

Definition proposed in the model kin-specific standards

Individuals related to a child by blood, marriage, tribal custom, and/or adoption and other individuals who have an emotionally significant relationship with the child or the child's parents or other family members (often referred to as "fictive kin").

Kin caregiver mental models about kinship care

Mental models are "deeply held beliefs and assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of operating that influence how we think, what we do, and how we talk."¹⁵ Although often unconscious, these models profoundly impact how people and systems behave and interact. Efforts to change behavior without addressing underlying mental models are often unsuccessful or impermanent.

During our research sessions with kin, participants shared how important and meaningful it felt being a caregiver for the youth in their lives. However, several kin also noted that the decision to become a formal kinship placement was not always an easy one due to their understanding of family, kinship care, and the child welfare system more generally. Because of this, it's critical that professionals working with kin recognize and address mental models that may discourage kin from seeking to become placements so that they can design more effective outreach and engagement strategies. The research team observed various mental models among the kin we spoke to:

- **Lack of resonance with the term "kin."** Kin, particularly relatives, have a complex relationship with the term "kin." During our workshops, some expressed their discomfort with the term "kin caregiver," describing the term as "cold" and impermanent (something "they can un-call you," according to one caregiver we spoke to) in comparison to terms like "grandparent" or "family," which fully encapsulate the type of lifelong relationship they wish to have with youth. This discomfort may lead some to pursue unsupported guardianship and remove themselves from the child welfare system and the resources available to them.
- **Ambivalence towards receiving outside support.** While the majority kin we spoke to sought out financial support to help them through the approval and licensure process, several relatives described their caregiving role as their family duty, and hesitated to apply for licensure because they felt guilt about getting "paid" to take care of family. Additionally, relatives may be deterred

¹⁵ Kramer, M., Kania, J., & Senge, P. (2018). [The water of systems change](#). FSG.

from applying for licensure because of stigma from caseworkers and others in their community that share this belief.¹⁶

- **Fear of system entanglement.** Kin refuse placement because they distrust the child welfare system and the invasiveness of the processes that impede on their personal privacy. Others fear that their own children might be removed if they become involved in a case, especially if they ask for assistance once they achieve placement. This fear especially deters families of color who are more likely to have a history of harmful interactions with the child welfare system.
- **Wariness about disrupting current relationships.** Kin express concern about how taking in the child of a relative or friend can disrupt the relationship they have with the child, parents, other family members, and the people in their own household. For older kin such as grandparents, becoming a placement might also disrupt the relationships they have with similarly aged friends who have retired and moved into a different stage of life.

Quote from the field

“We are not prepared to take them. It’s not part of the plan. But when they are a part of your family, with support or without support, you have the obligation to take care of them.”

- Kin caregiver in California

Community outreach

In addition to developing outreach efforts to inform community members about kinship care and encouraging adults to become foster parents before a child comes into their care, jurisdictions can also do outreach with hospitals, schools, and other local community organizations. This collaboration aims to increase awareness about the needs of kin caregivers and to help them adapt forms and practices to accommodate a range of family structures. Outreach should include policies and processes to support kin caregivers irrespective of whether the child is in the custody of the child welfare agency.

Such efforts should be mindful of the specific needs and challenges certain kin caregivers face. For example, older kin (e.g., grandparents, grand uncles and aunts) often lack local kinship resources geared towards elder needs. The older kin we spoke to shared numerous concerns about becoming a kinship placement, describing challenges related to:

¹⁶ Rushovich, B., Sun, S., Wilkins, A., Ball, J., & Downing, K. (2023). [Kinship therapeutic foster care pilot implementation: Final evaluation report](#). Child Trends.

- Not feeling as physically capable of taking care of children at their age, especially younger ones;
- Feeling lost without the social connection and community support of similarly aged caretakers;
- Not having extended family they can rely on for child care or similarly-aged peers they can ask caretaking advice from;
- Struggling with technology and preferring mail or in-person communication during the approval and licensure process, which requires more hands-on support from caseworkers;
- Experiencing financial hardship given their need to spend their retirement savings and/or return to work to support youth;
- Feeling worried about being cleared by medical professionals despite their health status because of stigma and untrue beliefs about older adults.

Community outreach example

New Mexico's Aging and Long-Term Services Department put together a list of [local and national resources specifically for grandparents or other kin caregivers raising children](#), which includes resources from a broad range of actors, both within and outside of child welfare.

Other potential caregivers who can unintentionally self-select out of becoming a kinship placement:

- **LGBTQIA+ kin**, who aren't always aware they can be kin caretakers because they fear they will be stigmatized or discriminated against because of their gender identity and/or sexuality. This is particularly the case in communities where all or most service providers are faith-based, and is likely to expand outside of those geographic areas given the elimination of protections under federal law.¹⁷
- **Undocumented immigrants**, who might avoid institutions due to fears of deportation or incarceration. Service providers noted that undocumented kin often decline kin placements due to fears of government interactions, while kin in mixed status homes fear how interacting with child welfare agencies might expose their extended family to harm.

Agency staff suggested that community outreach efforts can help raise awareness about kin caregiving opportunities across various communities, particularly in those that share youth's cultural

¹⁷ In January of 2021, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) finalized a [new rule](#) that rescinded previous regulations barring discrimination on the basis of non-merit factors including age, disability, sex, race, color, national origin, religion, gender identity, or sexual orientation in HHS-funded programs. While many of these factors are protected under federal law, the rescission of this regulation eliminated federal protections for sexual orientation and gender identity for youth and families involved with the child welfare system

and ethnic backgrounds to facilitate more culturally sensitive and suitable placements. States should consider including kin-specific strategies as part of their diligent recruitment plans.

States could also consider providing more training and tailored resources and support to transition-age youth to facilitate them becoming kin caregivers for younger siblings in care. While some states have enacted age-limits that prevent this, this is not a recommended practice as each potential caregiver should be evaluated on their own merits. With the right training and support, young adults have proven to be safe, effective caregivers, helping to create stability and maintain family bonds for their siblings in care.

1.2. Building a supportive ecosystem and infrastructure

Explicit agency leadership support

Agency staff that reported deploying kin-first practices in their jurisdictions often report that leadership signals an explicit commitment to kinship care and reflects that priority in agency policies, kinship targets and measurement systems, and staffing structures.

Agency staffing structures and staff competencies

In addition to leadership support, agency staff spoke to the importance of building the appropriate staffing capacity and skills to support kin-first practices, including:

- **Dedicated staffing structures:** Creating positions and/or staffing structures dedicated to supporting kin caregivers.¹⁸ However, such structures need to be implemented carefully, as caseworkers reported feeling siloed in their departments and feeling a lack of clarity across roles and responsibilities.
- **Manageable workloads:** Distributing roles throughout the kinship process to improve casework quality and prevent burnout of overburdened staff, and as a result, incentivizing caseworker retention. The participants we spoke to recommended raising pay and creating more amenable schedules to recruit and retain more caseworkers.
- **Timely and consistent communication:** Creating communication channels to keep kin informed about the status of their licensure applications and any exemptions or waivers.
- **Continuity of care:** Establishing a deliberate process for passing case files between assigned caseworkers and ensuring continuity of care for youth and families, especially in jurisdictions with high caseworker turnover.

¹⁸ Many states already have teams dedicated to licensure and approval of prospective kin caregivers. By adopting kin-specific standards, states can reduce their need for these teams, allowing them to shift staff capacity toward long-term support of kin.

Beyond case management, a key component of supportive ecosystems is how agency staff and other professionals like police officers and service providers engage with youth and kin. Misinformation about kinship care public policy and agency protocol create preventable barriers for families, while a lack of culturally responsive and trauma-informed practices fosters distrust. Participants recommended that agency staff and other professionals receive training on the value of kin, their unique needs, and how best to meet these needs. In particular, they advocated for:

- **Up-to-date information about agency policies and resources:** Ensuring frontline workers are equipped with the latest information available about approval and licensing requirements, exemption and waiver protocols, and resources and funding available to kin inside and outside the agency. By way of example, New Hampshire is investing in a new initiative to educate district offices about newly instituted kinship care programming like the rollout of a kinship care unit.
- **Skills and competencies:** Increasing training opportunities for professionals on how to interact with families, focusing on trauma-informed care, cultural competency, and bias reduction to mitigate trauma caused by involvement with the child welfare system and improve relationships between the agency, kin caregivers, and the community as a whole.
- **Investment in diversity:** Hiring more agency staff who share a similar racial and cultural background as the families they serve to encourage community trust and culturally responsive casework. This should also include hiring staff with lived experience in the child welfare system, who have a deep understanding of the challenges families are navigating.

Language and accessibility

In addition to staff cultural competency, multilingual materials and services are critical for supporting the diverse range of families who enter the child welfare system. In some jurisdictions, non-English speaking kin found it difficult to meet kinship care process requirements due to language barriers and the potential delays caused by the availability of interpreters/translators. Even when agencies hired bilingual staff and interpreters, they were often overwhelmed by requests to translate application forms and training as well as act as interpreters in court, family team meetings, and more.

Quote from the field

“There was one family where I went to their home five to six times, and I was there hours everyday doing the training. We did it together because they were Spanish speaking so I made an exception. It took a lot of my time.

Definitely our Spanish-speaking families struggle the most. They just want to care for the grandkids, and they don't understand why they need to fill this stuff out. But that's our part, we just need to educate them more: 'It's not just you; everyone has to go through this.'"

- Agency staff in California

Across jurisdictions, however, agency staff noted how many families lack a cell phone, email address, and/or reliable internet access. Older caretakers also mentioned struggling with using technology. Agency staff noted the need for procedures and resources to be adapted to families' technology access. For example, they recommended offering mobile fingerprinting to help increase access in rural areas.

Court system buy-in and accessible court procedures

Courts and legal professionals play a powerful role in kinship care.¹⁹ Legal professionals and agency staff noted that the courts and legal professionals should receive more education on the value and relevance of kinship care to help facilitate better decision-making and support for children. In California, participants recommended implementing a court liaison to educate court officials and legal professionals about how to better utilize the agency's kinship care expertise and knowledge about its families. Legal professionals also wanted to increase the opportunities for kin to exercise their voice in court and to see more judicial consistency around integrating the perspectives of kin during hearings.

Additionally, legal professionals recommended improving the court process for kin by creating better scheduling protocols. For example, in California:

- Understanding the burden attendance at court can place on families.²⁰ One legal professional suggested that hearings scheduled to be in-person should be placed earlier in the docket to minimize the amount of time families must take off from work to appear in court and wait for their hearing.
- Others advocated for increasing the use of remote expert testimonies to minimize case delays that are due to expert availability.
- Another agency staff suggested tracking and limiting the use of continuances in court.

In general, kin advocated for more transparency regarding their child's case as well as ensuring access to affordable or pro-bono legal representation.

¹⁹ Redlich Epstein, H., Johnston-Walsh, L., Pokempner, J., Creamer, K., Phelps, K. (2021). [Kinship care in Pennsylvania: Creating equitable systems for families](#).

²⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2009). [Court performance measures in child abuse and neglect cases: Technical guide](#).

Requirements that don't promote child safety

Across California, Indiana, and New Hampshire, participants and subject matter experts highlighted the impact of policies and practices that contribute little to the safety of children in kinship care. Requirements like paternity tests or housing occupancy standards don't speak to a caregiver's ability to care for children and create bureaucratic hurdles that can require strategy, new systems, and immense resources to work around. Because of this, it's important to note that while this report compiles short-term solutions recommended by participants to promote kinship care in their jurisdictions, including waiving requirements on a case-by-case basis, some of these challenges could be avoided altogether by assessing state and local requirements and removing those that are unnecessary. New flexibilities around kin-specific licensure present an important opportunity for title IV-E agencies to critically reevaluate what measures are important for child safety.

Quote from the field

"I think we operate with a sense of fear of lawsuits and we jump and put these policies [kinship requirements] in place. We make them up to feel good and safe but it creates a fear among all the staff because now I have a big checklist to keep us safe so I'm going to say no about a possible placement. Someone needs to really look at those policies and make it safe but more friendly so that we can use the process at a fast pace and get those kids with kin."

- Agency staff in California

1.3. Centering families and communities

Family-centered casework

Young people, parents, and kin spoke at length about not being consulted about important decisions that affect them, having their preferences ignored or discounted by workers, and overall feeling ignored and kept in the dark about their case.

Quotes from the field

Youth in California described their interactions with caseworkers as follows:

- "No one was actually listening to what I wanted or needed."

- “They never asked questions about how you’re feeling, your mental health, what you need.”
- “They don’t have answers about what is going to happen to you.”
- “A lot of people saying your voice matters, but then you get in trouble when you speak up.”

Families wished that agencies establish a culture of care that prioritizes youth and family perspectives in placements and case outcomes, through regular formal and informal check-ins. Essential to this culture is a focus on the triad of kinship families: “Often, child welfare systems focus on the parents, child, and caregiver independently; however, in kinship care, the entire kinship triad—child/youth, birth family and caregiver—must be served collectively. In the kinship triad, each member is an integral part of the whole, maintaining balance and stability.”²¹ Whether it’s during the family finding process, family case meetings, or family therapy and other services, jurisdictions should approach the family unit as a whole.

Families also wished that the requirements of their child’s case could be made less burdensome and better tailored to their everyday lives, including flexible scheduling and more accessible options for engaging with caseworkers, courts, community service providers, and schools (e.g. virtual attendance via Zoom, phone calls). Families reported struggling to meet the inflexible and time-consuming requirements of the various hearings, appointments, and programs they are asked to attend. In addition, those requirements frequently change due to factors out of the family’s control. Some young people reported needing to go to therapy multiple times a week, with the therapist’s office far from their home and transportation offered to take them only available at designated times. Others noted the lack of willingness of caseworkers and service providers to accommodate youth’s work or extracurricular activity schedules. More flexible requirements could cut down on the stress and time commitment of doing so many visits, reducing the chance that youth and families are penalized for being “non-compliant.”

Preconceived notions of what a “suitable” family looks like

Quote from the field

“There is an implicit bias in how relatives and kin are considered for placement and it happens from the call-in, to assessment, and beyond. I one time worked with a family where the kin was discounted as “being on drugs” and “government assistance” because she used Medicare to fund treatment for her diabetes.”

²¹ A Second Chance, Inc. (n.d.), [Why kinship care?](#)

Families, agency staff, legal professionals, and other professionals lamented caseworker bias against certain family structures and living situations, leading to kin being overlooked during the search and placement process. When asked what factors have wrongly disqualified kin from being seen as appropriate placements, agency staff, legal professionals, and families shared examples of the negative beliefs caseworkers might hold towards the different types of families and social groups they work with. As a result, families belonging to historically marginalized communities—especially Black and Native families—are deemed unsuitable, not because they present a legitimate safety risk, but because they deviate from a societal view of a “good family” based on white, middle-class values.

For instance, participants reported that caseworkers were less likely to reach out to or approve kin whom they perceived as unsuitable due to their:

- **Past system involvement:** Caseworkers might categorize kin who have also been involved in the foster care system at some point in their life as unfit because they assume these kin will perpetuate the same family issues when caring for the child in question, even if they now demonstrate stability. This includes kin who have had cases for their own children as well as kin who have lived experience being children in the system. Adult siblings with a recent history in the foster care system were especially discounted because of their age and presumed life skills coming out of care;
- **Criminal background:** While federal law includes a small set of convictions as barriers to licensure, state laws and practices often go beyond federal requirements and add additional barriers, seeing kin as safety liabilities on account of having committed crimes with no impact on child safety and denying them the opportunity to become caregivers. Additionally, states are inconsistent in their evaluation of expunged crimes;
- **Disability:** Kin with known physical and mental disabilities are seen as unfit placements even if they have additional family members or staff who can assist in caretaking tasks they are unable to manage themselves;
- **Mental health diagnoses:** Kin with known mental illness (e.g., bipolar disorder) or living with someone with known mental illness are seen as unsafe placements even in cases where they are stable or actively receiving treatment;
- **Family structure:** LGBTQIA+ kin, single parent households, and others who do not ascribe to a two-parent, nuclear family structure are sometimes deemed less suitable to care for children;
- **Perceived lack of closeness:** Individuals or families might not be considered close enough kin because of cross-cultural differences in who constitutes “family” and how that shows up on a family tree;

- **Perceived strained family relationship:** Relatives may be discounted if they are perceived to have a “strained” relationship with parents because caseworkers assume the relatives would interfere with parent reunification in the future;
- **Perceived socio-economic status and subjective social status:** Individuals or families might be considered as lacking capacity for long-term placement based on the neighborhood they live in, the way they dress, caseworker perception of how well-spoken they are, and other highly subjective factors; and
- **Perceived “non-compliance:”** Some kin were deemed “non-compliant” because of cultural ways of expression (e.g., Deaf kin being labeled as “aggressive” because of the physicality of American Sign Language) or difficulty meeting demanding requests for calls and meetings (e.g., being unable to take time off working in the fields during farming season).

Quote from the field

“Home check procedures can conflict with a relative and kin’s cultural and religious beliefs, which can cause people to behave in violation of agency or court policy. For example, we recently had a case where a very conservatively religious kin caregiver didn’t open the door for a required home check because she was alone in the house and felt it was inappropriate for a male caseworker to visit without a male relative present. Because she refused the home check, she was labeled as non-compliant in her placement record, making it harder for her to be considered a viable permanency option.”

– *Legal professional in Indiana*

Participants also reported examples of caseworker bias towards certain living situations over others. Agency staff and legal professionals noted how caseworkers sometimes conflated being a “good home” with being a “safe home,” and therefore held kin to a higher standard than is required for an appropriate placement.

Quote from the field

“What’s a barrier to kin placements? Where they’re located. It’s true. Just the appearance of someone or their house or apartment... It’s going back to the bias ordeal. So location is a big thing. Say you live in a nice house in Manchester but you look ‘iffy.’ [The child welfare agency] is gonna say no even if you have a beautiful house. But let’s say you’re well spoken in a rundown apartment but you’re clean? Then they’ll approve you even if you have mice. ‘But you seem nice.’

Stupidity. You can’t just know someone and know if a place is safe just talking to someone one

time. And you get a call from a kid about their abuse and still think 'Why am I here?' Whoever is going to come to the house and check it out will see peaches and roses but you have this kid."
- *Young person in New Hampshire*

Kin and service providers suggested caseworkers and other professionals should receive training to challenge their biases and cultivate cultural competency as well as have more personal and professional experience with the communities they serve to challenge bias towards certain types of families and living situations.

2. Kin search and engagement

In this section:

- *Operationalizing search and outreach*
 - ↳ *Staff dedicated to kin search and outreach*
 - ↳ *Continuous search requirements and accountability*
 - ↳ *Tracking kin finding information*
- *Involving youth and families in the search process*
 - ↳ *Parents*
 - ↳ *Youth*
 - ↳ *Collaborative search*
- *Leveraging a broad range of sources for kin finding*
 - ↳ *Family team meetings*
 - ↳ *Tools and technology*
 - ↳ *Tribal engagement*
- *Leveraging the court system*
- *Engaging kin beyond placements*

Kin-first cultures start with diligent and continuous kin search from the moment a child comes to the attention of the child welfare system, and continuously thereafter. Long search turnarounds make it more likely kin will disengage from the placement process before approval, leaving children in non-kin foster care or institutional care for longer than they needed to be.

2.1. Operationalizing search and outreach

Caseworkers across jurisdictions noted that not enough resources are dedicated to kin search and outreach in both the initial and later stages of a case. Heavy caseloads, case procedural tasks unrelated to search, departmental siloing, and a lack of accountability measures around search and reassessment can lead to viable kin placements falling through the cracks. Furthermore, it's often easier and faster for agency workers to place a child with a known foster family than to invest time in kin finding, particularly if the kin might be out of state.

Staff dedicated to kin search and outreach

To help alleviate overburdened caseworkers, many jurisdictions now have internal or contracted Family Finding Units. These units can be responsible for tasks ranging from initial family identification and outreach to initial background checks and home studies.

For example, caseworkers in California recommended creating a separate unit so that Emergency Response caseworkers don't have to do court reports. In another example, an agency is experimenting with utilizing assistants for visitations, which allows the primary caseworker to focus more on high impact tasks.

Continuous search requirements and accountability

Kin search should be a priority at multiple stages of the case, not just when children are first removed from their parents' care.²² Although many states have mandates that declare kin as the preferential placement, kin face various barriers to approval. For instance, kin may not qualify as placements initially but could become suitable within a few months. Similarly, kin who initially feel unprepared to care for a child upon first outreach may later change their mind and feel more ready to take on that responsibility. However, the lack of incentives or reminders to reassess kin, high caseworker turnover, and bias against relatives believed to face similar challenges that were cause for removal or with previous involvement with the child welfare system mean continuous search is left to the discretion and motivation of the caseworker.

²² Casey Family Programs. (2018). [What are some examples of effective family search and engagement?](#)

Case study example

The Wisconsin Department of Children and Families developed a “[Family Find and Engagement](#)” guide for caseworkers engaged in family finding. It outlines “specific times in a case when caseworkers are required to make diligent efforts in locating and engaging non-custodial parents and relatives.” These times are: initial placement; change of placement; if paternity is established; prior to permanency plan hearings; and when evaluating the permanency plan.

Jurisdictions have begun instituting new accountability policies during initial placement and reassessment to encourage continuous search. For example, in Indiana, kin finding metrics are used in performance evaluations. In states like New Hampshire, caseworkers and service providers for reunification services regularly check in with parents and youth about potential adults and at every placement change. Other states require managers to ensure caseworkers have done due diligence for search before signing off for a child to be placed with non-kin.

Tracking kin finding information

Subject matter experts pointed to the use of genograms as a way to visually make sense of youth’s relationships and connections. A genogram is a diagram that combines pictorial symbols that represent the type of relationship between individuals (e.g., marriage, siblinghood), the closeness of a relationship (e.g., strong relationship, conflicted relationship), and other important information.

Case study example

The Tennessee Department of Children’s Services includes in their “[Kinship Exception Request](#)” form space and instructions to draw a genogram.

Using one case management system for all elements of a case is another invaluable tool, particularly in jurisdictions that have difficulties in continuity of care because of high caseworker turnover. Workers in some jurisdictions reported struggling with having to use disparate systems, and wished for the ability to integrate all information related to family finding and outreach (e.g., contact information, court benchmarks, possible connections, and more) in one system.

2.2. Involving youth and families in the search process

Understanding and prioritizing the kin placement preferences of youth and families is an important step in fostering trust within families.

Parents

Parents are an important source of information about the child's family tree and other non-relative kin. However, parents can be hesitant towards sharing names of kin, which slows down the kin search process. This can be for various reasons:

- Feeling shame over losing custody of their children and embarrassment over having to reach out in times of hardship;
- Anticipating that the kin with whom they have a strained interpersonal relationship would become a barrier to reunification in the future or would otherwise destabilize their relationship with the child;
- Fearing that their child would be exposed to harm if placed with relatives in families they know have a history of intergenerational abuse and trauma;
- Wariness of how long distances would prevent them from playing a major part in their child's life;
- Fearing that sharing names could bring kin under the surveillance of the child welfare system, particularly if kin are undocumented or have a history of criminal court system involvement; and
- Seeing the system as an adversary, not a partner in their child's well-being;

Because of this, it is important that caseworkers and service providers working with parents not only use trauma-informed approaches to communicate the removal and kinship care process with parents but also use alternative strategies for searching for kin. Particularly in situations where there is a strained relationship between the parents and one parent is reluctant to share information about the other, agency staff suggested using alternative methods like agency-hired private investigators and father engagement programs.

Additionally, it can be beneficial for caseworkers and service providers to engage in family finding prior to removal. This can help avoid issues of parents who are not cooperative during removal because of the trauma they are experiencing. In some cases, engaging kin early can help to support the family and prevent the need for removal altogether.

Youth

Although some youth believed they had a say in which kin were contacted during initial outreach, others felt they were completely ignored and kept in the dark about their case proceedings. Several youth also described how they were forced to self-advocate and build a case for the kin caregivers they wished to live with.

Quote from the field

"I remember my mom was taking me to look at dogs at a pet store and all these police rolled up around our car and they just took my mom away. I was left looking at my 3-year-old sister and I was only 12. The cop was not trauma-informed and didn't have non-violent communication skills.

The cop asked me 'Where are you going to go?' He asked a 12 year-old where she was going to go with her 3-year-old sister. I was like 'I have one family member' and the police officer had me call her. When she picked up the phone, the officer just told her that they took my mom away and then demanded 'What are you going to do with the kids?' They just weren't very kind about how they shared the information."

- Young person in California

As with parents, families and professionals suggested investing in more training for how to engage with youth when asking about kin information and placement preferences.

Case study example

In California, Uplift Family Services uses a [heart map](#) exercise so staff can learn more about the relationships that young people have and look for ways to strengthen and maintain those relationships. As soon as a young person enters care, they are introduced to a heart map and invited to surface people who are important to them by asking them to list *someone in their heart* on the lines connected to the heart. Staff then make an action plan to set up visits, phone calls, and other continuing connections with each identified relationship. The action plan is shared with the young person's entire team, including their foster parents, so everyone can help.²³

²³ Child Welfare Playbook. (2023). [Use a heart map to identify a youth's important relationships.](#)

Collaborative search

In general, caseworkers can use a broad range of sources for kin search. In addition to empowering parents and young people to name and reach out to kin to ask for support, caseworkers can also use initial kin outreach to help identify other kin who should be contacted. In this collaborative search method, kin identify other kin, who identify other kin, expanding the reach of the search and deepening the role of kin in the process. In New Hampshire, caseworkers host community outreach events and ask non-kin adults in the child's life (e.g., child care center staff; school counselors) for other kin recommendations that immediate family members and friends might not be aware of.

2.3. Leveraging a broad range of sources for kin finding

Family team meetings

Across jurisdictions, agency staff and service providers recommended inviting newly found relatives to family team meetings as well as allowing youth to bring kin and other trusted adults. They also track attendance and the balance of kin present from both sides of the family. In California, all supportive adults invited to family team meetings are asked, "Even if you can't take placement, is there anyone else within your family or that the child knows who we should be talking to?" to broaden the list of potential kin.

Case study example

In Minnesota, Olmsted County deploys family involvement strategies to mobilize family voices in their family group conferences. These strategies include using an impartial facilitator, aiming for a ratio of 3:1 family participants to paid staff, and ensuring representation from both maternal and paternal family members.²⁴

Tools and technology

Agency staff recommend expanding the toolkit available to caseworkers for kin search. To help facilitate family finding conversations with youth and families, caseworkers use genograms and other kinship diagrams. They also use online tools like social media, search engines, and obituaries to find contact information for known and assumed kin. In cases where there are no known relatives,

²⁴ National Institute for Permanent Family Connectedness. (2020). [Episode 10 - Sustaining Family Involvement](#). Let's Have a Conversation (podcast).

caseworkers reported using government agencies and public records databases like Accurant to find family connections.

Case study example

The Michigan Department of Health and Human Services has a [Diligent Search Checklist](#) that compiles the different avenues for identifying and locating relatives, including the Department's computer applications, Department of Community Health/Vital Records, social media and internet searches, Whites Pages and Yellow Pages, Genealogy.com, Ancestry.com, and more.

Particularly for online tools, it is important that agencies expand who has authorization to use such tools to minimize access delays.

Case study example

The District of Columbia's Child and Family Services Agency has an [Appropriate Use of Social Media](#) policy, including as "part of diligent search activities for [...] non-engaged kin."

Tribal engagement

Caseworkers should have training about the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) and protocols in place for engaging with tribes during the kin search process. This includes quick identification of a child's Native American heritage and tribal affiliation to comply with ICWA so the tribe can offer family or cultural connections or services.

Protocols must engage the tribal community in every step of the process, including recognizing placement preferences under ICWA: "a member of the Indian child's extended family; a foster home licensed, approved, or specified by the Indian child's tribe; an Indian foster home licensed or approved by an authorized non-Indian licensing authority; or an institution for children approved by an Indian tribe or operated by an Indian organization that has a program suitable to meet the Indian child's needs."²⁵

²⁵ Korthase, A, Gatowski, S.I., & Erickson, M. (2021). [Indian Child Welfare Act \(ICWA\) courts: A tool for improving outcomes for American Indian children and families](#). National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges.

Case study example

The Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families has a set of policies and procedures around working with tribal communities. This includes guidance for “contacting and coordinating with Washington State federally recognized tribes when there is a case involving a family that is or may be affiliated with a tribe.” The Department also “monitors and provides technical assistance to its own staff and contracted tribes and agencies” to support this work.²⁶

2.4. Leveraging the court system

Courts play a critical role in the kin search process, even before the placement process begins. Judges may inquire about kin search and outreach efforts undertaken by caseworkers and ensure that family finding requirements are held as accountability measures.

Case study example

In Ohio, judges and magistrates are given a [Quality Hearing Toolkit](#) to help facilitate discussions with caseworkers about their efforts to find relatives and explore kinship care options. They ask caseworkers to “provide a summary of the intensive efforts to secure a placement with a fit and willing relative or kin,” including the use of search technology. The toolkit also prompts the court to ask caseworkers to justify, in cases where kinship care options were explored but not pursued, why the relatives were not deemed a possible placement, as well as to specify, in cases where a child is placed in kinship care, whether the caregiver is linked with training, services, and financial support.

Legal professionals also noted the importance of creating a more flexible process to establish paternity.²⁷ Court-mandated paternity requirements like costly DNA testing and marriage and birth certificates make it more difficult for paternal relatives to be recognized as placement options. For example, paternity tests are no longer subsidized in certain courts, and several legal professionals shared examples of judicial officers refusing to place children with paternal relatives or kin without established paternity, even if the child already had a relationship with that adult. In other jurisdictions, birth fathers are required to come to court and demonstrate father status in order for paternal

²⁶ Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families. (n.d.). [Indian child welfare](#).

²⁷ Establishing paternity is not a requirement for licensure under federal law. By adopting kin-specific licensing standards and a definition of “relative” that includes unrelated adults with an emotionally significant relationship to the child, the child’s parents, or other family members, states and tribes can avoid this issue entirely.

relatives to be considered for placement. Several legal professionals argued that court questions asked during these father status sessions (e.g., "Has he taken this child into his home? Does he take the child out into the community?") can indirectly discriminate against certain types of families like non-cohabiting households, families with fathers who live geographically far away, or single mothers who maintain contact with paternal relatives but not the father. To address these issues, courts could provide families free DNA testing and reevaluate their paternity requirements, allowing caseworkers to start search and outreach for paternal kin regardless of whether legal paternity has been established. With an expansive definition of kin, there is no reason to establish paternity.

Quote from the field

"I had a case where the child had been adopted right after birth. The adopted parents terminated their parental rights when she started demonstrating signs of Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder a few years after so her case workers searched for and found her biological grandparent. But since all her paperwork was altered, there was no way to prove paternity. DNA testing, lawyer fees, travel—all had to be paid out of pocket for the grandparent to even be considered for the placement process."

- Service provider in New Hampshire

2.5. Engaging kin beyond placements

Outside of placement, jurisdictions can promote strategies that allow kin to support children and parents even if they are not placement options. Preserving a child's connections is widely recognized as being important for healing and development, yet, in the latest round of Child and Family Services Reviews, only one state was evaluated as being strong in its "efforts to preserve the child's connections to his or her neighborhood, community, faith, extended family, Tribe, school, and friends."²⁸ Engaging non-placement kin is important for:

- Creating backup plans in case an initial kin placement falls through;
- Maintaining relationship with kin who could become approved placements in the future;
- Providing youth with stability and care regardless of their placement;
- Offering support for parents who are attempting to reunify with their children;
- Serving as respite or providing other supports that bolster stability of kinship placements; and
- Expanding and nurturing the relationships youth have once they exit or age out of care.

²⁸ CHAMPS Campaign. (2022). [What the child and family services reviews tell us about how states are doing on foster parenting priorities identified by the CHAMPS Campaign.](#)

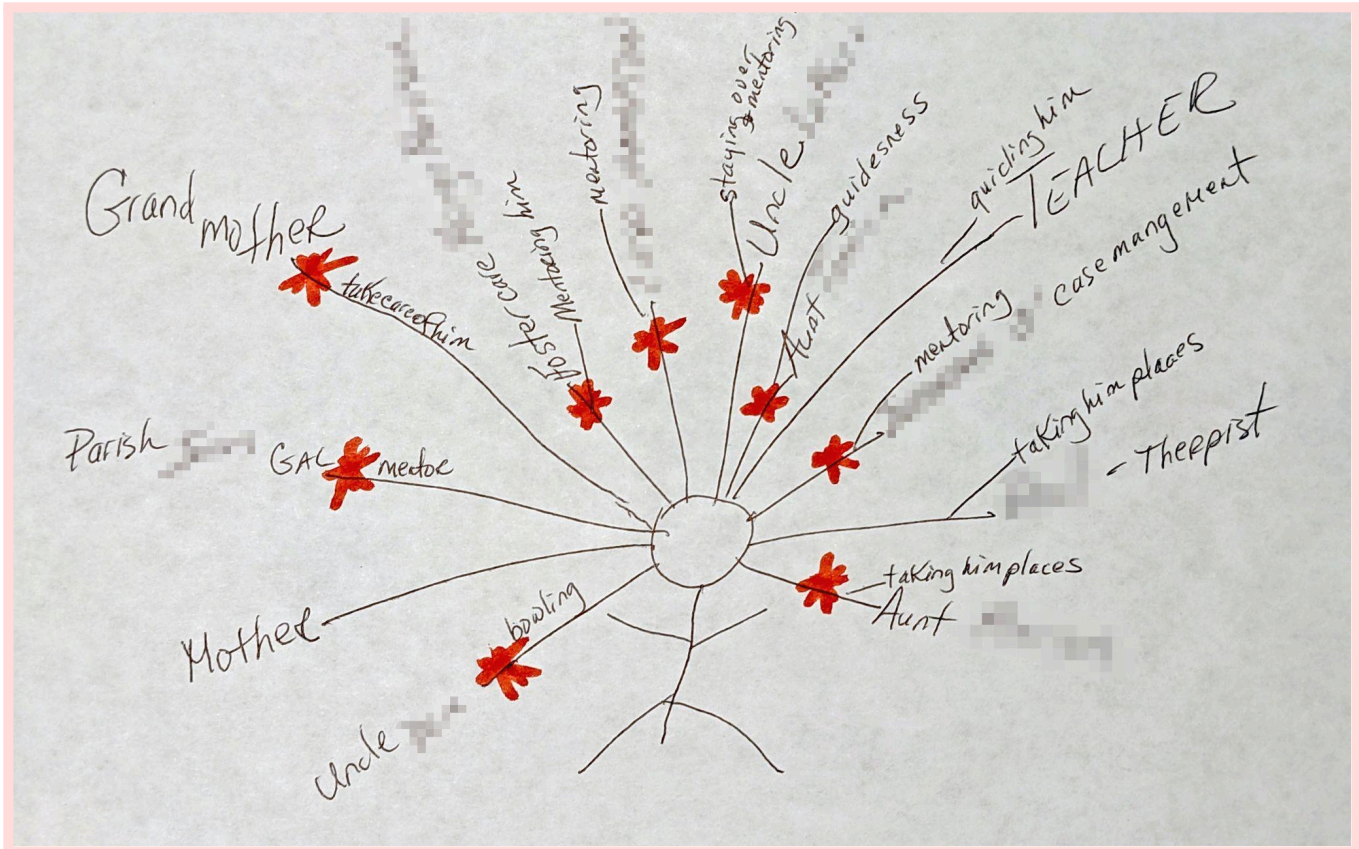
Case study examples

Michigan’s Department of Health and Human Services has a [Relative Engagement and Placement](#) policy that specifies options for “maintaining contact when placement is not an option” when it comes to relatives. Ways relatives can maintain contact include, but are not limited to: supervising parenting time; transporting the child to appointments, visitation, etc.; attending school programs, athletic events, etc.; visits, phone calls, and letters; and providing childcare or respite. Similarly, Iowa’s Department of Human Services [Employees’ Manual](#) stipulates that if a kin “is unwilling or unable to assume care of the child, determine if the person is willing to provide other types of support to the child to maintain their connection to family and others with whom they have a significant relationship. This type of support could include postal mail or e-mail contact, phone calls, visits, respite, and participation in holiday or other gatherings.”

Young people across jurisdictions highlighted the following ways in which supportive adults could be engaged in their lives:

- Having a robust presence at planning meetings;
- Serving as emergency contacts;
- Being used as child care or respite care for designated kin caregivers;
- Acting as mentors;
- Overseeing supervised visitation;
- Accompanying youth to medical appointments, sport engagements, etc.; and
- Engaging in fun activities (e.g., going out bowling, going to the movies).

Photo from the field



Many young people listed having a lot of adults in their lives that they consider to be kin. While they could not necessarily live with them, young people could see those adults playing a variety of other roles (e.g., being a mentor, providing transportation, tutoring, going out bowling), which shows the importance of kin engagement and relationship building beyond seeking out kin solely for the purpose of placement.

Jurisdictions can ensure young people stay connected to supportive adults by making keeping in touch with kin a formal agency responsibility and a component of foster family and institutional placement training and practice. They can connect kin with financial and travel support to remove barriers to involvement; invest in centrally located visiting centers; ensure engagement opportunities are accessible to kin regardless of disability, financial security, immigration status, and more; and provide youth access to activities where they can make connections with non-relative adults (e.g., sports, clubs, camps).

Case study example

The Arizona Department of Child Safety runs a program named the “Fostering Sustainable Connections” program to help children living in group homes and shelters “locate and reconnect with relatives, friends, coaches, neighbors, teachers, and others who have been important in their lives,” in order “to help facilitate positive and supportive relationships with caring adults who will remain in the child’s life throughout adulthood.”²⁹

3. Kin placement, approval, and licensing

In this section:

- *Establishing kin as the default placement*
 - ↳ *Kin as presumptive placement*
 - ↳ *Exhausting all kin options before non-kin placement*
- *Improving interstate placement practices*
- *Streamlining kin approval and licensure*
 - ↳ *Criteria for evaluating placements*
 - ↳ *Procedural barriers to kin approval and licensure*
 - ↳ *Structural barriers to kin approval and licensure*
 - ↳ *Flexibility in requirements for kin*
 - ↳ *Process timelines and connection between kin and youth*
- *Guiding and helping kin through approval and licensure*
- *Challenging placement with non-kin*
 - ↳ *Disincentivizing non-kin placements*
 - ↳ *Advocating against non-kin placements in court*

²⁹ Arizona Department of Child Safety. (2016). [Department of Child Safety wins federal approval for innovative intervention program to help children in group homes and shelters.](#)

3.1. Establishing kin as the preferred placement

While states recognize the importance of kinship care, the latest round of Child and Family Services Reviews revealed that no states were evaluated as strong in their efforts to place children with relatives, highlighting a substantial gap between the ideals and the realities of kin placement.³⁰

Kin as presumptive placement

Prioritizing placements with kin begins with assuming kin placements as the preferred option from the outset. This means having statutes in place that designate kin as presumptive placements; ensuring leadership directs agency staff to make every effort to place children with appropriate kin; and creating a sense of urgency for making the first placement a kin placement.

Case study example

In 2020, New York State's Office of Children and Family Services issued an [Administrative Directive](#) establishing "a kin-first firewall practice to increase safe and appropriate kinship placements for children." The directive defined a firewall practice as one "intended to make kinship placements the presumptive placement for children." The practice is to "address both instances of initial removal and of children being moved while in care."

In some jurisdictions, there is a desire among agency staff and other professionals to provide training to placement teams that emphasizes the importance of kin placements in order to help translate those mandates into the priorities and mental models of placement teams. There are also opportunities for more peer modeling from jurisdictions that have implemented kin-first practices.

Exhausting all kin options before non-kin placement

Prioritizing placements with kin also means that non-kin placements should only be considered when all appropriate kin options have been deemed non-viable.

However, in practice, agency staff shared that case managers are inconsistent about ensuring caseworkers have exhausted all avenues for kin placements before signing off for the case to move to a foster placement or another placement. Parents and kin also hypothesized that caseworkers lack accountability in ensuring they have exhausted search options. This is particularly common in

³⁰ CHAMPS Campaign. (2022). [What the child and family services reviews tell us about how states are doing on foster parenting priorities identified by the CHAMPS Campaign.](#)

Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC)³¹ cases and is further complicated by limits on the number of ICPC applications that can be sent to another state for each child.

3.2. Improving interstate placement practices

Several jurisdictions reported implementing practices that facilitate interstate placements:

- Conducting pre-interviews with kin for outgoing ICPC cases to help prep receiving states and reduce time to placement in California; and
- Coordinating a new ICPC border agreement with Massachusetts, Maine, and Vermont that encourages quicker kin placement via a preliminary home study before the full licensing process begins.

Quote from the field

"My grandma lives in Maine but I feel like [agency workers] don't want to put the effort in. I also know this one girl where her mom is in Oklahoma and they're doing that paperwork - that started six months ago and she hasn't talked to her caseworker since then. No one's getting in touch with her but as far as she knows the paperwork is getting done so she can finally leave the residential [facility]."

- *Young person in New Hampshire*

Nevertheless, challenges remain within the ICPC process that dissuade agency staff and legal professionals from seeking interstate placement with kin:

- Recent high-profile cases of failed kinship placements have produced judicial wariness towards ICPC cases; and
- In incoming cases, the referral policy requires agencies to receive all paperwork before starting the home study process, which may cause a delay in placement.

Lifting restrictions on interstate healthcare, schooling, and housing access can reduce the need for families to make inconvenient and costly moves to be able to care for the child. This is particularly true for families living near state borders, where a move down the street could constitute an interstate placement. Streamlined ICPC processes can promote reunification by keeping children closer to their parents and allowing them to be raised by kin instead of institutional placements.

³¹ To understand more about the ICPC, see Lindner, A. (2022). [Understanding the interstate compact on the placement of children](#). National Council for Adoption.

Cases involving interstate placement will also be further streamlined as states adopt kin-specific licensing standards, particularly if states align their standards closely to the model standards. By removing unnecessary licensing requirements, states will minimize the intrastate differences in licensing standards. This is expected to reduce delays and inefficiencies in the ICPC process.

ICPC agency staff also recommended agencies develop protocols for placing outgoing cases where trans and queer youth move to states that have passed restrictions on medical access and gender expression. Such protocols could exist alongside federal guidance suggesting that states utilize out-of-state placements to meet the health and safety needs of LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults.

3.3. Streamlining kin approval and licensure

Child welfare systems use the terms “approval” and “licensing” in different ways, often interchangeably. Regardless of terminology, we recommend that every state adopts a kin-specific approval/licensing process in line with the new [kin-specific model licensing standards](#). This recommended process would result in all kin caregivers getting full approval/licensure, and all associated supports, as quickly as possible, preferably starting on day one of placement.

To increase the utilization of kin placements, families, agency staff, and other professionals advocated for removing barriers to make it easier to place young people with kin, including streamlining kin approval and licensure requirements. Individuals who were interviewed for this project were largely unaware of the then-proposed federal rule, offering this recommendation independent of any changes at the federal level. When informed of the proposed flexibilities, they expressed excitement and a hope that their jurisdictions would prioritize implementing streamlined kin-specific standards once finalized.

Criteria for evaluating placements

The context facing kin caregivers and the youth in their care differs in important ways from those of non-kin foster families due to the existing connection they share. Accordingly, some licensure or approval requirements that may promote safety for children placed with non-kin foster parents simply create a barrier to safe and appropriate placement for kin.

A particularly salient example is housing occupancy requirements, where bedroom requirements for children in foster care are stricter than if a child was living with their parents. Kin shared examples of how they were required to supply siblings with their own bedrooms, even though the same young people didn't have their own bedrooms while living with their parents. There are legitimate safety reasons why a state might require children to have separate bedrooms from strangers in a non-kin

foster home, but it does not make sense to prevent a child from living with their grandmother because they would have to share a room with a cousin or a sibling. Moreover, young people might be comfortable without their own bedroom (e.g., sleeping in an unenclosed loft space or on the couch in the living room) when placed with familiar family or trusted adults. Some jurisdictions have built flexibility into these rules. California, for instance, requires that each child have a separate sleeping space, but does not define that as a bedroom, allowing for children to sleep on a couch or in a sleeping bag at the home of a kin caregiver, instead of being placed with non-kin or in an institution.

The new federal flexibilities provide a critical opportunity for states and tribes to reevaluate these processes and implement kin-specific standards that focus on child safety without extraneous elements. It's important to note that the need to streamline kinship licensure highlights the need to reconsider approval and licensure requirements across all families, including non-kin foster parents. State-level requirements like needing a high school diploma or recycling services create unnecessary barriers for children to be placed in suitable homes. Regardless of whether a caregiver is kin or non-kin, state requirements that do not protect the safety and wellbeing of the child should be lifted or reduced. As state agencies prepare for and implement kin-specific licensure and approval standards allowed under the new federal rule, we urge them to carefully consider the necessity and impact of their current requirements.

Agency staff across jurisdictions reported having internal guides in place to facilitate more successful kin placements, which clarify protocols (e.g., home study, financial applications) and document workarounds. However, various participants lamented how stringent or decontextualized the safety criteria were for kin placements, arguing that safety evaluations should instead reflect factors like a child's development and personal sense of safety. For example, kin, agency staff, and legal professionals shared how:

- Notions of safety related to cleanliness can be overly disqualifying (e.g., an unclean floor is a bigger danger for toddlers than it is for teenagers); and
- Notions of safety for homes and backyards overstate safety issues for children familiar with the property (e.g., a rusty car or dead tree in the backyard is less of a hazard for children who are used to avoiding it).

Additionally, even when there are policies in place to evaluate the viability of a potential kin placement, caseworkers have discretionary power in how they interpret those policies, which means that kin placements can be vulnerable to potential caseworker bias. Agency staff across units and even within the same team differed in how they operationalized, weighed, and contextualized certain placement criteria. For example, a common point of difference was how caseworkers characterized the relationship between kinship care and reunification in the short-term versus the life of a case. Several

caseworkers described how they are less likely to place youth with otherwise qualified kin if they have a strained relationship with the parents because that kin caregiver could interfere with reunification in the future. In contrast, other caseworkers prioritized the present wellbeing of the child and placed youth with appropriate kin regardless of their relationship with parents. Reunification and child stability are both important criteria for kin placement but how they are weighed in a case can differ across caseworkers.

Procedural barriers to kin approval and licensure

Overall, various participants recommended re-thinking approval and licensure requirements to better align with the realities of kinship care, rather than applying the same requirements as foster placements, particularly those that do not impact the safety of the children under care. It is worth acknowledging that, in many jurisdictions, requirements for licensure or approval are stricter than requirements for placement. This leads to a reality where kin caregivers are deemed safe enough to care for a child, but not safe enough to license. Subsequently, the child welfare agency places children in its custody with kin but does not provide them support for the child's care.

Photo from the field



- A stack of files shared by a kin participant demonstrating the number of forms required to be considered for licensure.

Kin believe that they are "put through the ringer" in order to become licensed. Kin shared how overwhelming it is to need to produce and keep track of many documents; be subjected to invasive conversations, visits, and tests; and constantly have to prove their "placement fitness," especially as they also did not feel well-informed about what their rights are and what they're entitled to. Agency

staff also reported observing disrespect, intimidation, and discrimination towards kin. This further underscores the vital importance of kin-specific licensing standards, which present an opportunity to shift from a system that disqualifies caregivers unless they prove worthiness to a system that ensures child safety and provides support to help the child and caregiver thrive.

Quote from the field

"[I] felt initially punished for something that wasn't my fault. I felt violated and incensed when people came into my home and want to know every breath you take, for you to prove yourself."

- *Kin in New Hampshire*

Furthermore, kin lamented how approval and licensing requirements can also be expensive. Having to spend money on fingerprinting, DNA testing, legal support, fire and health inspections because they live in old or historic homes, and more³² can push kin, who are statistically far more likely than non-kin to experience financial insecurity,³³ into an even more precarious financial position. And while agency staff noted that there are often funds and referrals they can offer kin, it is up to the discretion of the caseworker to offer and submit them. In addition, training programs that are required as a condition for licensing put a strain on kin because while youth have already been placed by the time most start the training, childcare is rarely provided.

Ultimately, most kin said that it took six to eight months and sometimes even over a year to become licensed, meaning either denial of placement for the child or else months where caregivers receive no support for the child's care. This is an unacceptable timeline that undermines the wellbeing of the child without improving safety.

It is for this reason that the model kin-specific licensing standards adhere closely to statutory requirements and do not include training, DNA testing, historic home inspections or any other provisions not required under federal law. To the degree that agencies find other elements important, they are encouraged to offer those as a support after licensure, not a condition of licensure. This will ensure families are not unnecessarily delayed in placement or receipt of equitable financial support.

³² With the exception of fingerprinting, federal law does not require kin to complete any of these steps, and they have been intentionally excluded from the model kin-specific standards.

³³ Sakai, C., Lin, H., & Flores, G. (2011). [Health outcomes and family services in kinship care: Analysis of a national sample of children in the child welfare system](#). *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*, 165(2), 159–165.

While caregivers across the board are overburdened, discouraged, or de facto excluded by unnecessarily strict approval and licensing procedures, some caregivers are uniquely burdened, including:

- Non-English speaking kin, who need potentially delayed or unreliable translation or interpretation services;
- Kin with limited or no access to technology, which may be required to access communications and/or complete licensing training requirements;³⁴
- Kin in rural areas or those without reliable access to transportation who have to travel far distances to satisfy requirements like in-person fingerprinting;
- Low-income families who cannot afford to front the costs associated with approval and licensing requirements;
- Hourly and seasonal workers who cannot easily take time off work to keep up with the volume of agency staff and service provider meetings, many of which are required to be in-person.

Quote from the field

"They called us and it was like everything had to be done right away. We have to get fingerprints. We have to get the house check. And it was all the same day. I was called by one social worker and then it ended up being three or four [workers] who were calling me to do the application. After that we had to do the fingerprinting. I was getting worried. [...] The reason we were worried was because they were talking about a lot of appointments, many appointments, and you know, we work in the farm field. [...] Another thing that I didn't like was that they said that they wanted everyone in the house to get fingerprinted. And in my head, I started thinking: 'For what? They only need two people to be the responsible parties.' So we started worrying again. I kept wondering 'Why are they asking for so much?'"

- *Kin caregivers in California*

Structural barriers to kin approval and licensure

Criminal background checks remain a major barrier for kin caregivers to be approved and licensed. It's important to note that federal law contains only a small number of crimes that are considered disqualifying for licensure or approval, and the barriers that prevent many potential caregivers from

³⁴ Training is not a requirement under federal law and, accordingly, is not included in the model kin-specific licensing standards. While it is encouraged that agencies provide training for kin, it should be offered as a support, not a condition of licensure.

being licensed or approved exist only in state law.³⁵ Agency staff reported that applications for criminal background exemptions (such as for a 20-year-old drug possession) can take a long time because of bureaucratic requirements of the Department of Justice and the agency department heads. Moreover, the appeals process of a background check is left to the discretion and know-how of agency staff, who are not always clear on how the process works. In general, these barriers disproportionately impact people of color who are more likely to have criminal records because of racism in policing and the criminal court system. As states adopt kin-specific licensure, it is highly recommended that they include only the barrier crimes enumerated in federal law, rather than require an exemption process for further state-imposed barrier crimes.

Checks of state child abuse and neglect registries, which are required for any potential caregiver in their current state of residence and any state in which they've lived during the last five years, can present a major barrier to licensure, often taking upwards of 180 days to process. Many states have found workarounds to help expedite the process to ensure it does not unnecessarily delay financial support for kin. This includes practices like not requiring witnesses or a notary when signing documents, accepting electronic requests, not charging registry fees, and using a general inbox (not a specific person's email address) for receiving requests.³⁶

Quote from the field

"I wanted to live with my cousin so bad, but she wasn't able to take me because they didn't even have running water at the time. She wasn't going to be able to get through the inspection."

- *Young person in California*

For many of the families we spoke to, housing and the cost of living are also a profound challenge for kin to take young people under their care. In some communities, families sharing a dwelling or living in multi-family homes are less likely to get through home inspections for their inability to meet the required occupancy limits. Given the housing crisis, families may also live in homes that require significant repairs, which tend to be more affordable, but can impact their ability to pass a home check. One caseworker in California estimated that over 70 percent of young people in her caseload can't stay with family or in their community of origin because of the cost of living. As states adopt

³⁵ Federal law disqualifies potential caregivers from approval or licensure when a fingerprint-based background checks reveal a felony conviction at any time for child abuse or neglect, for spousal abuse, for a crime against children (including child pornography), or for a crime involving violence, including rape, sexual assault or homicide, but not including other physical assault or battery or if background checks reveal a felony conviction in the past five years for physical assault, battery, or drug-related offenses.

³⁶ Child Welfare Playbook. (2023). [Out of state child abuse and neglect checks](#).

kin-specific licensure standards, they are strongly encouraged not to include space considerations, which are not required under federal law.

Additionally, the housing crisis also affects a family's ability to pass background checks, as they may have someone in the home with a criminal history. Kin caregivers shared how they had to decide between taking in a child and kicking out other residents in the house (e.g., spouses, adult children) whose criminal backgrounds could not be exempted. Those who chose to kick out residents then struggled to find affordable housing for that individual. This also affects parents, who often live with the kin of choice. Kin must choose between taking in the child and disrupting the parents' stability and efforts towards reunification or not taking in the child and leaving them in foster care.

Quote from the field

"There was a case where grandmother had to go and stay in a hotel with the youth while her housing situation was put in order because her husband, who lived with her, had an out-of-state criminal history. We can't see hits in an out-of-state background check to really assess the risks so he was forced out of the home up until the court hearing. I'll never forget what he told me: 'Tell me what Black man doesn't have a criminal history?'. He grew up in the era of civil rights and he was falsely arrested years ago because of systemic racism."

"The length of time that it takes to get a relative cleared. So whether it's a Live Scan [sic] process or background check from DOJ, there are just so many layers of signatures and approvals. Like if there's an exception that needs to be made, whatever that looks like... it takes days. We get in our own way with our own red tape."

- Agency staff in California

Flexibility in requirements for kin

Many of the requirements that act as barriers for kin (e.g., criminal background exemptions, home checks, age and siblings exclusions) are state requirements, not federal. Jurisdictions don't have to consider waiving requirements; they can revisit some of the requirements to confirm if they need to be there at all. However, jurisdictions design a number of statutes and policies to encourage kin approval and licensure within their particular policy constraints.

Case study examples

The Oklahoma Department of Human Services has an [Exceptions & Waivers](#) list that allows certain exceptions for resource applicant requirements when it comes to “rules or standards that do not compromise a child’s safety or well-being and does not violate federal or state statutes.” Examples of exceptions include “sleeping arrangements, references, animals and pet safety, and documents required as part of the application packet.” Similarly, the District of Columbia’s Child and Family Services Agency issued a [Temporary Licensing of Foster Home for Kin](#) policy that outlines a list of potentially waivable requirements that “the director of the Agency may waive for licensing of kin.” Examples of waivable requirements include age of caregiver; number of children in the home; space and sleeping arrangements requirements; training requirements; caregiver income; and criminal records.

In one jurisdiction, agency staff appreciated how centralized and formalized home study and licensing coordinator roles made the licensing process more consistent and efficient. To further support these flexible practices, agency staff recommended that:

- Family courts should run background checks with public record databases and rely on kin self-disclosure during court-ordered assessments to speed up the initial placement process;
- More training and documented protocols should be provided to help socialize workarounds caseworkers can use to help kin pass criminal background checks;
- Housing standards should be more flexible (e.g., teenage youth should be allowed to sleep in the living room of a relative if they request it; lofts should qualify even if youth don’t have a completely enclosed space);
- Home inspection requirements should be updated; and
- Safety checks should be performed in other units so that kin are not starting from scratch when they come in contact with the licensing team.³⁷

It’s important to note that approval and licensure requirements need to be waived on a case-by-case basis, meaning that there is a bureaucratic burden for caseworkers that disincentivizes working with kin. Additionally, while the use of waivers and exceptions is needed in order to adapt licensing protocols to the realities of kinship care, participants noted that using language such as “making use of

³⁷ While agency staff recommended this in our interviews, a streamlined, kin-specific licensure process—as allowed under the new federal rule—could render this recommendation obsolete by allowing all checks to occur efficiently at the time of placement.

exceptions” or “relaxing requirements” signals to agency workers that kin placements are by definition “lesser than” foster homes.

If states adopt the kin-specific licensure and approval standards in accordance with the new federal flexibilities, they can, in essence, erase both the bureaucratic burden and the stigma around use of waivers by creating streamlined practices that are tailored to the needs of kin families. Because the majority are state requirements, not federal, this presents an opportunity for jurisdictions to revisit their requirements for kin and non-kin to assess if they’re promoting child safety or creating a barrier to family-based care.

Process timelines and connection between kin and youth

Although agency staff shared the importance of using kin as placements, several legal professionals observed that they saw less evidence of their jurisdiction keeping youth connected to their family and kin outside of placement services. Long and interrupted outreach, approval, and licensure processes can prevent youth from spending time and bonding with kin, a bond that could be crucial to subsequent kin placement and permanency. This is particularly true when children and youth are placed with non-kin foster homes or in institutional facilities that are often less willing to take extra steps to ensure young people remain connected to their kin and communities.

In addition, kin might disengage if too much time has passed between initial outreach and when caseworkers provide resources about placement options. Kin assume the long gap in time indicates that youth have become “lost in the system.”

To mitigate this, agencies implemented the following strategies:

- Pre-placement visits between youth and kin to maintain connection and bonding while awaiting final approval and placement;
- Frontloading kin approval to minimize delay in agency motion changes in cases of placement removal; and
- Agency counsel checking for and authorizing any reasonable relative and kin options before initial placement to save time and minimize the need for modifying court orders in the future if there is a need for placement changes.

If adopted and implemented effectively, kin-specific licensing standards permitted under the new federal rule will expedite the licensing and approval process by removing unnecessary, non-safety barriers, mitigating the need for most strategies to address timeline-related concerns.

3.4. Guiding and helping kin through approval and licensure

Participants agreed that there isn't enough financial support for kin to adapt their current living situations to pass home checks and cover the costs of other approval requirements. Kin noted the unexpected expense of home modification, especially on such short notice, to pass inspection. As such, kin almost unanimously advocated for separate funding just for immediate needs to meet approval requirements, including home repairs, fingerprinting fees, the cost of paternity tests in putative father cases, and physicals and vaccines. By adopting kin-specific licensing standards, states can mitigate many of the costs associated with unnecessary state-imposed requirements like paternity tests and square footage or occupancy requirements. It is still recommended that agencies provide funding to proactively support kin caregivers in making home improvements or covering other costs that improve child well-being, but not as a condition of licensure.

Agency staff noted that, while there are some financial waivers and referrals they can offer kin, it was up to the discretion of the caseworker to offer and submit them. Some caseworkers are able to connect kin to small funds to pass placement requirements via kinship navigator programs, field administrators, churches, the American Red Cross, local fire departments, and other local community organizations. However, agency staff observed that caseworkers need more education on how to find and connect kin to the resources that are available to them. Agencies also benefit from creating or partnering with a kinship care team that can focus on providing ongoing resource support while caseworkers address other priorities.

Additionally, kin noted that they did not know what options they have should they be denied licensure. Research in other jurisdictions has shown that kin aren't always provided written documentation of their denial or given insight into how to request a review of the agency's denial, file a motion to intervene, file a complaint against a caseworker, and other forms of self-advocacy.³⁸ The model kin-specific licensing standards include sample tools for informing prospective caregivers of their options for appeal.

To guide and help kin through the licensing process, common themes emerged around what participants appreciated or wished for:

- Providing kin with all the necessary information about the licensing process:
 - Implementing specific training for kin (as a support, not a condition of licensure);
 - Providing upfront clarity about what the licensing process entails;
 - Giving packets and checklists to kin;

³⁸ Redlich Epstein, H., Johnston-Walsh, L., Pokempner, J., Creamer, K., Phelps, K. (2021). [Kinship care in Pennsylvania: Creating equitable systems for families](#).

- Providing hands-on guidance from caseworkers during the licensing process;
- Offering both in-person and remote assistance; and
- Redesigning the appeals process to be shorter and more efficient to incentivize families who were denied licensure to make an appeal.
- Providing unlicensed kin with material support:
 - Providing unlicensed kin with per diems, assistance with childcare, initial bed and bedding vouchers, and initial clothing vouchers;
 - Providing fiscal managers the autonomy to approve flexible delivery of per diems during the licensing process; and
 - Integrating childcare with licensing training as most kin already have youth placed with them by the time they're expected to attend training.

Additionally, agency staff recommended:

- Developing an informational hotline to guide kin through steps of the licensing process;
- Creating an online system where families can find and ideally submit all their forms;
- Sharing licensing packets with the ICPC unit so incoming families can get a head start on their application; and
- Implementing a better kin screening process during outreach to ensure only kin who are fully committed to becoming a placement go through the process.

Adopting kin-specific licensing and approval standards will streamline the licensure process and prevent most material concerns from acting as a barrier to kinship care. Still, agencies should create kin-specific resources and practices to ensure kin have all the information necessary to navigate the process. Separate funding sources should also be established to help kin caregivers meet the material needs of taking in a new child, even if those needs would not prevent licensure or approval.

3.5. Challenging placement with non-kin

While participants advocated for making placement with kin easier, they also advocated for making placement with non-kin harder. For non-kin placements this includes requiring additional steps and/or senior staff sign-off or approval, placing added scrutiny, and increasing oversight and supervision.

Case study example

In 2021, New Mexico issued a [Program Instruction Guideline](#) specifying that caseworkers “must obtain County Office Manager approval prior to placing children or youth with non-relative licensed resource families.”

Disincentivizing non-kin placements

Agency staff in multiple jurisdictions noted how family case managers are encouraged to seek placements and permanency with institutional placements or non-kin foster parents rather than kin because it minimizes the additional work on their overburdened caseloads.

Agency staff suggested that agencies add additional layers of approval for non-kin placements to disincentivize placement workers to assign youth to non-kin settings. .

Quote from the field

“When a child comes into care, there is a drastically different process for placing that child with a foster home versus their grandmother. The foster home just requires coordination of dropping that child off. In contrast, a grandmother and any household member who is 18 or older requires an immediate background check. The grandmother then needs to complete paperwork while we check their home. We have to get fingerprints and ensure that they're invited to parts of the case. At the same time we're submitting removal documentation to court. And then if grandma doesn't pass the background check, we've got to then go through the same process with another relative or kin. So by moving the child into foster care, a caseworker saves 24-48 hours of work.”

- Caseworker in Indiana

Youth shared stories of how the lack of oversight of non-kin placements often resulted in unsafe living situations, giving them little recourse to challenge that decision. Similarly, agency staff reported negative youth experiences in institutional placements, particularly group homes and Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Programs (STRTPs) that were not used for therapeutic purposes. These reports aligned closely with the stories of young people who were interviewed in a previous Think Of Us

research study, which showed that youth found institutional settings to be carceral, isolating, and often traumatic or abusive.³⁹

Quote from the field

"A lot of money is being spent on placing young people outside their families instead of just giving it to their families. To pay \$15,000 for a child to be at a STRTP is ridiculous. One month. For one child. The community would be outraged, outraged, outraged, if they knew that. No, I'm outraged. I'm outraged. [...] We're not placing kids in your homes anymore, but we're going to place them with the expensive facilities [and] nine out of 10 times those facilities are denying our kids but this is the only placement left for them."

- *Caseworker in California*

Youth suggested that increasing scrutiny on non-kin placements could help mitigate bad placements and encourage more appropriate kin placements. Specifically, older youth described wanting more foster care oversight (e.g., institutional placement oversight, access to foster parents' failed placement history for other cases) and accountability (e.g., more avenues to report bad placements), allowing them to advocate for themselves before being placed and facilitating easier transitions to more desirable kin placements.

³⁹ Fathallah, S., & Sullivan, S. (2021). [Away from home: Youth experiences of institutional placements in foster care](#). Think of Us.

Photo from the field



During research workshops, young people who were willing to do so were prompted to write a postcard to their younger self. Many expressed yearning for a better, more supportive, living situation than the one where they ended up being placed.

Advocating against non-kin placements in court

Court policy and judicial discretion can create barriers for kin placement. Although most participants applauded their jurisdictions' judicial commitment to kin placements, kin and legal professionals also observed:

- Kin in their jurisdictions cannot advocate for themselves in court because they are not party to the case, with the exception of submitting letters to the court. They must rely on Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), guardians ad litem (GALs), or agency caseworkers to make statements on their behalf about their successes and needs. Judges might also bar kin from entering the courtroom.

- The requirement of birth certificates to establish paternity creates barriers for paternal kin seeking placement, especially when birth mothers or former adopted parents had revised or excluded information from the document.
- Judges across jurisdictions inconsistently enforce orders for child welfare agencies to look into or reevaluate potential kin placements or issuing direct placement hearings, which, combined with insufficient continuous kin search, makes it less likely youth will be placed with kin later in a case.⁴⁰
- Pre-adoption matching meetings with foster parents or kin significantly influence permanency conversations, but parent attorneys and parents are excluded from these sessions. Legal professionals noted little recourse for alternative kin to challenge decisions made in matching meetings.
- Several kin also shared experiences with judges that they described as intimidating, coercive, and bullying.
- In general, legal professionals and kin expressed a desire to have the ability to advocate in court for enhanced community-based mental health resources to ensure families are equipped to meet the needs of children and youth, particularly those with intensive mental health needs and experience in the juvenile court system.

Additionally, the structure of the juvenile court and the bench's experience with kinship cases can significantly impact placement decisions. When court officials do not have a holistic understanding of a case or the benefits of kinship care, they are less likely to prioritize kinship care.

To counter these barriers, one jurisdiction shared working with their agency counsel who are trained to question motions for non-relative or non-kin placements.

Quote from the field

“As a parent attorney, I have to really advocate for locating kin. I will ask if DCYF is looking into family members if parents ask DCYF and they don’t respond. Sometimes DCYF is already on it, usually not. I like to bring it up on that first hearing even if there’s not a substantive order. The strategy is trying to hold their feet to the fire before the placement hearings and the child has already bonded with the foster parents.

I had a case the other day where the grandparents were denied for the initial placement throughout the case and now we’re getting down to a termination of parental rights and

⁴⁰ There is no federal mandate for establishment of paternity. In establishing kin-specific licensing standards, states are encouraged to use definitions of “relative” such that establishment of paternity does not delay or prevent kinship placement.

adoption. And, you know, we want these two kids. My client wants these two kids and the grandparents want these two kids. So we actually had a hearing on it to force DCYF to show their proof all in one place—documentation, denial letters. And this lets me check in with my client to corroborate DCYF’s claims so I’m prepared in court. So at least the court has been willing to take those requests for a hearing on occasion.”

– *Legal professional in New Hampshire*

4. Kin support

In this section:

- *Guiding kin caregivers through the foster care system*
 - ↳ *Comprehensive guidebooks for kin*
 - ↳ *Dedicated kinship care unit and kinship service providers*
 - ↳ *State and local oversight*
- *Providing financial support to kin*
 - ↳ *Disparity in financial support*
 - ↳ *Financial needs*
- *Ensuring equal access to resources available to parents*
- *Ensuring access to resources designed for kin caregivers*
 - ↳ *Strong networks of kin caregivers*
 - ↳ *Parenting classes and training*
 - ↳ *Comprehensive family mental health support*
 - ↳ *Specialized, consistent support for children with intensive needs*
 - ↳ *Wraparound and preventative services*

Kin and legal professionals wanted to see more consistency in judicial discretion and accountability. This could include restructuring court reports to be more evidence-based (e.g., expanding sources of information about the youth and family to include school professionals and other legal professionals) and improving judge and magistrate evaluation and oversight processes.

4.1. Guiding kin caregivers through the foster care system

A major hurdle kin face in becoming successful kinship placements is the lack of guidance they are given into what kinship care and the placement process entail, their rights, and what resources and support they are entitled to.

Comprehensive guide books for kin

All kin we spoke to expressed the need for a comprehensive guidebook for how to navigate the kinship care process, including information like:

- Contact information and roles and responsibilities for each member of the core caseworker team;
- Case-specific requirements and protocols;
- Regularly updated agency and service provider resource lists;
- Strategies and workarounds to access kinship resources available to them; and
- Copies of applications for government benefits (e.g., SNAP, TANF, Medicaid) and detailed instructions for how to fill them out.

Such a guidebook is particularly critical for kin who are not the medical and educational rights holder of the child (and therefore face additional barriers when trying to access birth certificates, medical insurance, educational services, etc. that would normally require parental consent). They are also critical for incoming ICPC cases, which often face additional restrictions on services and resources. Including information and applications in one place can also prevent applications for services getting lost or delayed by agency staff, thereby expediting the submission process.

Quote from the field

“We didn’t have a social security card for 10 months. They kept saying that his birth mother had to do that and that we can’t change that unless we adopt. We got the SSN by bugging the social worker until they cared.

[The child welfare agency] should have given us a Medicaid number for him under their department. They don’t have that. We need the parent because we don’t have the cards but mom lost custody and the hospitals still don’t know what to do. It took three months to get any cash assistance and we’re trying to raise an infant who also has severe health needs because his mother was using drugs while pregnant.

Neither me or my girlfriend have any experience raising kids and we were just given this infant one day. It's been so hard with no help and no one seems to care."

- *Kin in New Hampshire*

Dedicated kinship care unit and kinship service providers

In addition to supporting jurisdictions with kin search, family finding units and other types of kinship care units can also be designed to support initial kin placements and permanency. These units can support by:

- Providing welcome boxes with kinship books, list of resources, supplies, and swag;
- Offering mentorship on kinship care;
- Doing regular check-ins with kin; and
- Connecting kin with resources and service providers via education and medical liaisons.

Service providers like kinship navigator programs also serve as invaluable supports for connecting kin to services and resources from the moment of removal. In Washington state, the kinship navigator program supports partnerships with community providers through almost full use of the National Family Caregiver Support Program,⁴¹ while the New Hampshire Kinship Navigator Program:

- Helps kin find financial support outside of the Department of Children, Youth and Families via government aid and local grants;
- Connects kin to resources like food pantries;
- Offers parenting classes; and
- Provides support groups for families with different needs (e.g., caretakers of children with disabilities).

Case study examples

Various states use assessment tools to help identify and prioritize kin needs, such as Colorado's [Kinship Support Needs Assessment](#) form and Tennessee's Relative Caregiver Program's [Family Needs Scale](#). These tools assess needs related to financial support and other material support, mental health services and other health care needs, home environment needs, legal assistance,

⁴¹ California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare. (n.d.). [Kinship navigator program - Washington state](#).

social and relational support, and more.

State and local oversight

Some states have created a strong infrastructure of support for kinship families at the state and local level. In Washington state, a Kinship Care Oversight Committee, a collective of kin caregivers and community partners, provides guidance to the state Legislature to support and coordinate resources for kinship families across departments. This committee works with multiple state agencies and other entities to report on and remove barriers to supporting kin.⁴²

4.2. Providing financial support to kin

Disparity in financial support

It is critical that kin have equal access to financial support, regardless of their familial relationship, placement type, licensing, or ICPC case status. Across different jurisdictions, kinship families often face policy barriers:

- Licensed foster families are given greater financial support than unlicensed kinship families, who are seen as safe enough for placement but not licensure. Without a license, kin families must rely on state-funded programs or TANF child-only funds which are less generous, if they receive any financial support at all;
- Many kin caregivers we spoke to reported being advised to apply for un-subsidized guardianship, cutting off their ability to receive financial and other supports provided by the child welfare agency; and
- Financial support for incoming ICPC cases is contingent upon the financial policies of the sending state, which can put ICPC families at a financial disadvantage if they are moving to a state with a higher cost of living.

To address these disparities in financial support, jurisdictions should provide equal support to licensed and unlicensed kin caregivers as well as start payments immediately at placement. For example, California's Emergency Caregiver Funding Program offers funding for up to 365 days to caregivers who receive placement before approval. Agencies should also have referral systems in place for funding outside the agency to deliver training to caseworkers for how to navigate that system. However, by

⁴² Washington State Department of Children, Youth, and Families. (n.d.), [Kinship care oversight committee](#).

adopting kin-specific licensing and approval standards, states can mitigate the need for additional programs and referral systems by streamlining the licensure and approval process.

Financial needs

Regardless of licensure status, kin do not receive adequate support to cover the upfront, continuous, emergent, and emergency costs of raising a child in the child welfare system:

- **Upfront costs:** Beyond the costs related to meeting placement and licensing requirements (e.g., home and yard repairs, purchasing fire extinguishers and beds, etc.), kin caregivers also need to purchase basic home goods to welcome the child—particularly if they do not already have children of the same age in the house and must buy everything new. Kin caregivers might also need to cover any immediate healthcare costs while they work towards applying for the appropriate insurance.
- **Continuous costs:** These include food, baby formula, clothing, youth sports and other activities, child care, and more. Gas and public transportation vouchers are particularly critical in rural or geographically large jurisdictions where kin caregivers must travel long distances to access their youth's school of origin, case managers, service providers, and other supports.
- **Emergent, emergency costs:** Kin caregivers caring for children with certain types of medical, learning, or behavioral and mental health needs desire more financial support to address challenges that emerge as children grow.

Any financial support that kin can access should be provided upfront and minimize the need for complicated and lengthy reimbursement processes.

4.3. Ensuring equal access to resources available to parents

Photo from the field



A major barrier that kin caregivers reported is the insufficient child care support they receive (especially when comparing themselves to non-kin foster parents). During the study, many kin participants couldn't secure child care for the child in their care, which meant that they needed to bring them along to the research session.

In addition to equal access to financial support, unlicensed kin caregivers should also have equal access to the resources and services available to licensed foster parents. In general, jurisdictions should provide a continuum of resources and services for kin, including improved access to basic needs such as daycare, food, clothing, home furnishings, and out-of-state insurance. They should also establish centralized points of contact for community resources and wraparound services for families, and create formalized support networks and events for kin caregivers to provide emotional support, networking opportunities, and respite care.

4.4. Ensuring access to resources designed for kin caregivers

Because of their personal relationship with youth and parents, kin caregivers experience unique challenges that require additional support and resources to navigate.

Quote from the field

“A while back, you used to be able to have different agencies. Now you have to have visitations, therapy, etc. all with the same agency. They looped everybody to have all the services with the same providers. Caretakers should be allowed to pick whatever provider they have from whatever agency. You may be able to have a good therapist from one agency but the supervised visit person really sucks. The caretakers should have some kind of say-so.”

– *Kin in Indiana*

Strong networks of kin caregivers

Kin lamented the fact that they are given minimal training and funding yet are expected to flourish as caretakers, navigate new relationships with parents, understand their child’s education, health, and other needs, all while potentially lacking a community that can support with caretaking, child care, and respite.

Older kin, in particular, noted that when they were having kids, they were able to build community with the similarly aged parents of their kids’ friends. With the parents of their grandchildren’s friends, they struggle to relate or build community. They can’t build community with friends who are retiring and they can’t build community with young parents, leaving them isolated and without peer support to navigate the challenges of kinship care.

Kin caregivers should not only have access to community groups and special events designed for foster parents, but also kinship-specific groups. These should be online as well as in-person and offered in multiple languages to maximize accessibility.

Parenting classes and training

Older kin caregivers often need a refresher on how the education system works, while childless caregivers often need parenting classes as first-time caregivers. Basic parenting classes are especially helpful for young adults aging out of the system who decide to care for their younger siblings.

Kin caregivers are also more likely to need to reframe their relationship with the child, transitioning from a “fun” relative or family friend to a stable caretaker. This transition necessitates more training on managing the trauma and emotional needs of youth, navigating boundaries with parents as they work towards reunification, and supporting other familial relationships that have been strained by

involvement in the child welfare system. It is essential to provide training on emotional intelligence and trauma-informed approaches to caretaking as a support for families, not a condition of licensure.

Comprehensive family mental health support

While youth often have access to mental health services as part of their case plan, kin caregivers don't always receive the same access for themselves. Service providers and legal professionals also noted the need for family-based mental health services and kin-parent mediation services to equip families dealing with boundary issues, estrangement, and other challenges.

Specialized, consistent support for children with intensive needs

Youth, especially older youth, with intensive mental and behavioral health needs, are less likely to find placement with non-kin foster parents. Courts are also more likely to mandate placement in institutional facilities for those youth, diverting resources away from communities to institutions. Youth entering kinship care with high behavioral and mental health needs would benefit from living with kin trained as a therapeutic foster home. Jurisdictions should also provide extended support for kin raising children with special needs, including developmental issues that may only manifest later (e.g., fetal alcohol spectrum disorders).

Quote from the field

"I feel like we are pushing the envelope and kind of pushing back on being so super rigid. How can we get to 'yes,' right? What services can we put in place for this family? And there are some promising practices. It's a little complicated right now but currently we do have an agency that we contract with, and they provide expedited services and they are willing to work with our relative families to support them. They would even offer to train them to be ISFC [Intensive Services Foster Care] homes, and then that relative would get that ISFC rate. It's just getting off the ground and we hope to continue it."

- Caseworker in California

Wraparound and preventative services

Even when families have access to in-home and preventative services for children with intensive mental and behavioral health needs, kin can still face service delivery restrictions. Preventative services are often not truly preventative because families are screened out unless they demonstrate extreme issues, which makes it challenging to address emergent needs before they escalate. Moreover,

restrictions on the number of youth who qualify for wraparound and intensive services causes large sibling groups in the same household to receive disparate support, increasing the likelihood for escalation.

5.1. Enabling families to make informed permanency decisions

In general, kin reported feeling uninformed about the different permanency options available to them. They expressed wanting more upfront clarity about the range of options, what each option entails, and the tradeoffs between them. They also desired more clarity into the reunification process so that they could make more informed decisions of which placement and permanency options to invest their time and resources in. For example, a common narrative among kin who refused to pursue licensure was the belief that their placement was temporary, given what they had assumed to be a shorter timeline for the reunification process. Due to this misunderstanding, unlicensed kin were more likely to incur caregiving costs for longer than they initially anticipated, leading to financial difficulties that may cause them to give up their placement before reunification can happen, putting youth back with either non-kin foster parents or in group care.

Case study examples

Hawaii's Department of Human Services put forth a matrix titled "[Comparison of Permanency Options](#)" that helps families understand the three legal permanency options available to them (adoption, legal guardianship, and permanent custody), along with the legal status, financial support, and service access implications for each of the options. Similarly, the New York State Office of Children and Family Services Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program has a "[Permanency Comparison Chart](#)" that helps caseworkers and prospective guardians compare the options of adoption assistance, kinship guardianship assistance, and foster care.

Agencies in some jurisdictions invite parents, kin, and youth (if old enough) to child and family team (CFT) meetings to discuss permanency options and make permanency plans.

However, kin reported instances of feeling pressured by caseworkers to apply for unsupported guardianship rather than licensure, which subsequently creates barriers for both parent reunification and support from the agency. To their understanding, this is because the agency closes the case once kin caregivers attain guardianship. Many relatives and kin described their relationship with family caseworkers as distrustful and combative during this stage of the case. Service workers and legal

professionals shared how they have observed caseworkers try to “intimidate” relatives into unsupported guardianship even when nonoptimal for the family’s situation.

Other kin reported adopting—or being in the process of adopting—children in their care because they saw it as a way to avoid the young people interacting with the system again down the line, at which point they might be at risk of a non-kin placement. In that sense, adoption serves as a family preservation strategy.

Quotes from the Field

Kin caregivers in California described the reasons why they previously sought or were currently seeking to adopt the children under their care:

- “In the future, I want to adopt her. [...] I don’t want my granddaughter to go through this again. If I adopt her then my daughter [the birth parent] doesn’t have to go to court and do all the things they ask her to do. We can be a family together.”
- “Now [since the adoption was approved], I don’t have to worry about him being taken away. No matter what happens, he will be with me and I know I can take care of him. He doesn’t have to go through this again.”

5.2. Applying for guardianship

In order to be eligible for supported guardianship under the title IV-E Guardianship Assistance Program (GAP), kin must be a licensed foster home for six months. Accordingly, policies and practices that delay or prevent licensure can also delay or deny permanency for youth. Fewer kin caregivers meeting federal requirements for GAP results in fewer children exiting foster care to guardianship, pushing families toward adoption, which does not have the same federal licensure requirement.

This can have negative implications for children and families because adoption requires the legal termination of parental rights. This closes the door on future reunification possibilities in the case of parents who are incarcerated or overcoming substance use disorders and who may need more time. It also prevents some children and youth from achieving permanency altogether, as many youth do not want to have their legal relationship with their parents severed and kin caregivers often do not want to be the reason a loved one’s rights are terminated. This can have serious equity implications, particularly in the case of tribal communities where it is considered taboo to sever the rights of a living parent.

5.3. Offering post-permanency support

Various participants spoke of the importance of pre-permanency planning to identify the support needs of parents and/or kin caregivers and ensure that support doesn't stop post-permanency.

Agency staff spoke to the following post-permanency support:

- **Financial support**, including:
 - Covering adoption and guardianship fees;
 - Offering financial support via subsidy payments post-permanency; and
 - Designating kin who have not applied for adoption or guardianship as paid host homes once a young person turns 18 and remains in extended foster care.
- **Training and resources**, including:
 - Providing training on emotional intelligence and trauma-informed approaches to caretaking;
 - Providing in-home intensive family therapy as well as individual therapy for youth and kin; and
 - Offering other wraparound services, such as skill-based parenting programs, case management, substance use disorder programs, mental health support, respite, child care, education benefits (for youth), or health care.

Quote from the field

"I had two siblings who were placed with a paternal aunt and uncle. They wanted to adopt the boys but really struggled with the older child who required more intensive care because of his behavioral needs. But they found it difficult to tell us they couldn't do it and they kept avoiding doing the paperwork. We wanted them to know it was ok and that they shouldn't be ashamed about not wanting to adopt but it wasn't until the aunt became pregnant that it was clear she wasn't able to [do it]. Because the children had been in placement for 2.5 years, permanency needed to be settled. [...] The grandparents, who already had visits and lived nearby, wanted to adopt the older child. Unfortunately, the birth father lived with the grandparents, but was eventually able to move out and the older child could be adopted while still staying in contact with the younger brother.

The Post-Adoption Unit was able to provide in-home support for both families while working with the younger sibling during transitional separation from older brother and receiving a new baby."

- Caseworker in New Hampshire

It is worth noting that states are able to continue providing mental health, substance use, and in-home skill-based programs to kin caregivers if included as part of their title IV-E prevention plans, which unlock federal funds to provide continued support to children and kin post-permanency.

Case study example

In 2023, the State of Ohio instituted a Title IV-E Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program (KGAP) that aims to “facilitate another permanency planning option” in cases where “it has been determined that reunification and adoption are not appropriate options for the child,” and provide financial assistance to kin caregiver(s) “who have a strong commitment to caring permanently for the child.” The amount of the monthly KGAP payment is calculated on the basis of 80% of the child’s foster care per diem unless it’s less than \$350 dollars, in which case it would be equivalent to the payment that would have been paid if the child had been placed in a foster home. No income eligibility test is used when determining the monthly KGAP payment, but the child’s supplemental security income (SSI) benefits are taken into consideration in the determination of the final amount. The kin caregiver(s) continue to receive KGAP payments through the children’s 18th birthday, or through their 21st birthday for children with specific physical/mental disabilities or medical conditions.⁴³

⁴³ Ohio Administrative Code (2023), [Federal kinship guardianship assistance program](#).

Family Division Forms

New cases in the following case types must be electronically filed*
(Cases already in progress will continue in paper.)
CIVIL COMPLAINTS*
(Currently known as Civil Writ)
REFILE
REGISTRARS OF FOREIGN JUDGMENTS in the District Division
"OTHER CIVIL" CASES
(Such as Motions to Enforce Orders and Transfer Orders, Orders to Vacate a Building)
NAME CHANGE CASES
For information on Electronic Filing, please visit the 8th Judicial Branch website at www.judicial8.nh.gov and click on the Electronic Services icon at the right of the screen.
*Unless an Exception to Electronic Filing is filed and granted.
*New Civil Rules will go in effect on February 12, 2015. The rules were adopted by Order of the New Hampshire Superior Court dated October 28, 2014 and will be made effective by a subsequent Order of the Superior Court.

Parenting Petition

Individual

Agreement

Agreement & Parenting Plan Order
Designating School District

Appearance

Change of Address

Objection to...

Petition to Change Court Order

Financial Affidavit

Motion for...

Motion to Waive/Reduce
Filing Fee

Child Support Guidelines
Worksheet

Parenting Plan

Personal Data Sheet

Temporary Decree
on Divorce

Petition for Contempt

UCCJEA

Uniform Support Order

VS Instructions

Divorce
(no children)

Divorce
Petition for
Divorce
(with children)

Joint Petition
(No children)

\$250.00

\$250.00

\$250.00

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Conclusion

Over the last decades, the child welfare system has increasingly recognized the importance of a family-centered approach, and how crucial kinship care is to that approach. The flexibilities granted by the new federal rule represent a major turning point for the child welfare system. If states take the option to adopt kin-specific licensing standards and implement them effectively, these changes could not only improve the lives of youth and families, but also chip away the incredible bureaucratic and operational burdens placed on state and local child welfare systems.

However, discussions with youth and families during this study have highlighted that moving towards a kin-first culture depends not only on child welfare policy reform but also a radical reimagining of the systems families depend on and the societal beliefs about the value of kin.

As readers of this report review the challenges and opportunities related to the policies and practices of kinship care, and imagine a better and improved future of kinship care, we urge you to also consider what that future holds for families within and beyond the child welfare sector. These parting thoughts are our invitation to ground ourselves in the humanity of those who are impacted by the kinship care system.

Kin caregiving does not begin nor end with child welfare

Families navigating kinship care face considerable challenges, not only due to the burdensome child welfare requirements they are asked to meet, but also due to the lack of cross-system collaboration between the numerous government systems and agencies—such as housing, health care, disability, employment, and more. Kin are asked to negotiate complex and siloed bureaucracies that each have their own particular objectives and processes. The sometimes conflicting demands of these systems create a double bind for families where seeking to become a placement for a loved one can put them in an even more precarious position than before.

Government policies outside the child welfare system have a great impact on kinship families. First, policing is deeply embedded in U.S. government policy systems, disproportionately affecting Black, Native, poor, and immigrant families.⁴⁴ This not only increases the likelihood of a family interacting with the child welfare system, but the probability kin from those communities will have criminal backgrounds that disqualify them from becoming placements. Second, over time, services and programs intended to provide support—including housing, health benefits, and other resources—have been made less generous and less accessible over time. These structural challenges are a backdrop to the decision-making families engage in and profoundly shape kin's ability to seek placement and support youth.

⁴⁴ Roberts, D. (2022). [*Torn apart: How the child welfare system destroys Black families--and how abolition can build a safer world.*](#) Basic Books.

Quote from the field

“If I had a magic wand to fix the kinship care process I wouldn’t start with the process itself, I’d start bigger. If we could fix drug policy, specifically how it’s criminalized, that’s where I’d start.

The war on drugs has been going on since Richard Nixon, and if it were any other government program somebody would have said long ago we are wasting billions of dollars on solving a problem and the problem is worse now than it’s ever been. Our drug policy is a failure by any metric of the human imagination.

Legalize the crap. It would reduce the secondary crime related to drug abuse and would encourage people to seek treatment, meaning people are less likely to have a record in the first place.”

- *Legal professional in New Hampshire*

Kinship families who traverse government agencies and programs also find themselves having to make tough decisions and trade-offs between the resources they depend on and the youth they care for. We heard numerous stories of kinship families being forced to make difficult decisions if they wanted to continue accessing their state’s health and social services while acting as a placement for youth. For example, families living in public housing must deal with the bureaucratic consequences of taking in a young person who violates their home’s occupancy standards. Families can be priced out of upgrading to a larger home, forcing them to scramble for appropriate housing. These types of administrative processes place disproportionate burdens on families who are already vulnerable.⁴⁵

Quote from the field

“I had a case where a 13 year old was pregnant. This is where the ICPC system gets wacky. So we have a 13 year old who had a baby but she can’t apply for assistance because... she’s not 18. So she can’t get daycare assistance or anything through the state because she’s not 18. And then her kin caregiver can’t apply because her child doesn’t count as theirs even though she’s a minor. Does that make sense? So we have this baby who we’re trying to find daycare for so this child, his mother, can go to school otherwise she’s going to drop out of school at 13 to support her baby.”

- *Caseworker in New Hampshire*

⁴⁵ Edwards, F., Fong, K., Copeland, V., Raz, M., & Dettlaff, A. (2023). [Administrative burdens in child welfare systems](#). RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences, 9(5), 214–231.

Other families reported that seeking healthcare access for their children required navigating intrastate and interstate hurdles. Not only do families struggle with accessing important information to apply for services (e.g., social security number, medical records), they also must contend with state policies towards medical insurance. A common issue for families going through the interstate placement process is not being able to transfer insurance over state lines, which forces them to constantly spend money and time traveling between states to continue seeking care. Especially for families caring for children with intensive medical and mental health needs, this gap can be critical.

Quote from the field

“My son and his partner fulfilled all the requirements for them to get their kids back and they were waiting. But then the case worker required a drug test which doesn’t make sense because the kids weren’t removed because of drugs! They both tested positive because they have a prescription for medical marijuana in Rhode Island where they live. Now we don’t know what will happen with the case.”

- *Kin in New Hampshire*

Ultimately, kinship families touch systems that go well beyond foster care, so meeting their needs and giving children the chance to thrive requires broad, strategic thinking and interagency collaboration that moves beyond the purview of the child welfare system. Promoting a kin-first culture requires widening a child welfare-focused scope and calls for attention into how different agencies and services support kin. Our research indicates that every sector has a role to play to support kin families—from housing, to basic needs support, transportation, food and nutrition, healthcare, and more.

Kin caregiving operates under immense pressure with little acknowledgement

With growing evidence showing that children placed with kin have more positive behavioral and emotional health experiences than when placed with non-kin,⁴⁶ kin caregiving is seen as a way to help alleviate system-induced failure and trauma.

However, kin take on the immense responsibility of caring for youth and preserving families in a system that is not designed for them. Kin makes an immeasurable impact on the system and the lives of children, yet they are forced to shoulder incredible burdens. This is particularly true for the many kin

⁴⁶ Winokur, M., Holtan, A., & Batchelder, K.E. (2014). [*Kinship care for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children removed from the home for maltreatment. A systematic review.*](#) Campbell Systematic Reviews, 10: 1-292.

families who already face precarity because of housing, work, health, and other socioeconomic pressures.

In addition, many families expressed feeling isolated and overwhelmed through the process despite their motivation to be there for the children and young people in their lives. Independence is often equated with suitability for caregiving, and the system functions in ways that implicitly and explicitly isolate caregivers from the relationships they need to successfully care for children. We heard stories of caregivers who relied on their community for support, such as leaving a child with a grandmother while tending to other matters, only to feel that they were perceived as being too overwhelmed or incapable of providing care on their own. This independence mindset not only stands in the way of the interdependence inherent to natural familial support, but also prevents families from maintaining connections with their community.

Quote from the field

“I had to move my husband’s stuff out back, my son [the birth parent] needed to leave his room. I needed help with babysitting, school transportation, and they don’t listen so you have to hound them. I told them what I needed before I took the kids in. They knew about this and it’s been two months with no help. [The caseworkers] told me to go ahead and do the whole inspection. I had to do it online and had to do it three times. [...] I broke down and felt like I failed my niece and nephew. I got my home inspected and I was told it was too late because the kids were in the foster home for 12 months. I was fighting by myself.”

– *Kin in California*

Moreover, expressing needing assistance can be shame-inducing and risky, given the ways in which the child welfare system penalizes families asking for help. A kin-first system should not treat relying on and maintaining connections from one’s community as a failure of caregiving. Instead, a kin-first approach requires understanding that it takes a village to raise a child, and that kin should be allowed and even encouraged to ask for and receive help, both from the government systems that serve them and from their own communities.

Quote from the field

“Relatives are afraid to ask for help because they assume they will be stigmatized – they fear [they will] be seen as incompetent or that it will be reported.”

– *Community service provider in California*

Lastly, a kin-first system would not only seek to streamline and unburden the process for kin caregivers, but would also aim to acknowledge the important role that kin play even when the deck is stacked against them. What was clear in conversations with youth and families was the desire for what can essentially be described as a deeper culture of care, one that acknowledges the difficulty families face in a supportive manner and proactively strives to address those difficulties.

Quote from the field

"I think there needs to be a huge revamp in the district offices around the education staff receive on how to treat relatives. They need to learn to treat them with kindness and respect, that they're doing *us* a service. I mean, they're there for these kids, but that's also a service to us to have placements with relatives. There are definitely office-to-office differences in how relatives are treated, and some offices that we work with treat them very poorly. We hear these stories and we try to address issues but oftentimes that falls on deaf ears. It does not produce any change. But the lack of respect and communication is huge and it starts at the district office level."

- Caseworker in New Hampshire

Kin caregiving comes with exposure to system-induced harm

Separation from one's family and placement in foster care exposes young people and parents to system-induced trauma.⁴⁷ There is a growing understanding that child welfare reform efforts must focus not only on helping children heal from the trauma they have experienced but also mitigating this system-induced harm. Kinship care is seen as a key component of this reform, given research that clearly shows placement with kin reduces the traumatic impact of family separation.⁴⁸ However, the harm that system involvement inflicts on kin often receives little attention.

In addition to the barriers and challenges identified by participants, our research also suggests how the kinship care system institutionalizes harm in more insidious ways, namely in how it views kin and their suitability for caregiving through a deficit-based lens. This deficit-based culture, which permeates both beliefs and practice, forces kin to prove that they are harmless, that they are deserving, and that they are compliant enough to become placements and receive the necessary resources and support for their families. Cultivating a kin-first culture means challenging this deficit-based culture and the ways it is codified throughout the kinship care process.

⁴⁷ Children's Rights Litigation Committee. (2020). [Trauma caused by separation of children from parents: A tool to help lawyers](#). American Bar Association Section of Litigation.

⁴⁸ Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2022). [Kinship care and the child welfare system](#). U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Children's Bureau. The U.S. Children's Bureau.

One way this deficit-based culture manifests is by perceiving kinship families as potential causes of harm rather than protective measures against it. In general, the child welfare system is liability-focused and risk averse, and we can see this in the numerous non-safety requirements kin must pass to become placements. As we showed in this report, these requirements can be overly punitive and even inappropriate, given the unique personal relationship youth have with kin. The time families spend navigating bureaucratic hurdles that don't actually promote child safety and wellbeing unnecessarily prolongs the separation of youth from loved ones, increasing the likelihood of further trauma or harm.⁴⁹

Preserving family stability and wellbeing requires us to reorient the system to one "built on support rather than suspicion."⁵⁰ Kin caregivers are already positioned to be a source of strength and comfort for youth. Living in a familiar home and community, and being surrounded by a familiar culture—these are just some of the protective measures essential to children's wellbeing and kin can provide that. Practicing a kin-first culture means shifting kinship policy and case management from the belief that kin must prove they will not cause harm to children, to a belief it is the system's responsibility to support kin as they shield children from the harm they might experience in non-kin placements. Adopting kin-specific licensing standards is a critical first step.

Quote from the field

"I felt judged already and I didn't want [the caseworker] to be my home inspector because I felt that she was already judging before she even went into my house. Next time she came she brought other workers with her. [...] I was scared she might find anything to take him away. I was taken away as a foster kid, so I felt like you guys took me from my mom and that's the reason I can't visit her. [...] The next time she came, I told her she couldn't come in because of COVID, she said 'it's for [the child's] safety' and she kind of got mad but she respected my wishes. I am scared she is going to try to retaliate against me and take him away. You can't question them just as much as they question you."

- *Kin in California*

Another way this deficit-based culture emerges in kinship care is in prevalent narratives around deservedness. In our research sessions, kin shared numerous stories of the challenges they had to overcome to seek resources and support for their new kinship families. Notably, the outcomes for these families often depended entirely on the discretion of the child welfare agency staff and service providers they were assigned to. The bias professionals held towards certain types of families and

⁴⁹ Fathallah, S., & Sullivan, S. (2021). [Away from home: Youth experiences of institutional placements in foster care](#). Think of Us.

⁵⁰ Edwards, F., Fong, K., Copeland, V., Raz, M., & Dettlaff, A. (2023). [Administrative burdens in child welfare systems](#). *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences*, 9(5), 214–231.

living situations manifested in how they categorized families as deserving and undeserving of their patience, compassion, and efforts in guiding kin through the difficulties of the kinship care process.

To truly set up families for successful kinship placements, it is necessary to shift the child welfare system and other intersecting systems away from a baseline where kin are required to prove they are deserving of support,⁵¹ to one where we acknowledge that children do better when raised by kin. Consequently, efforts should focus not only on making placements viable but also on providing further support to ensure children can thrive. This requires a paradigm shift away from the system's motivation to reject kin caregivers unless they prove certain criteria of deservingness, to a goal of actively helping caregivers succeed.

One final area where we observed this deficit-based culture was the importance the child welfare system attaches to policy and procedural compliance. Often, failure to meet system demands by youth and families is framed as an issue of compliance rather than an issue of access, where strict expectations of compliance come with grave consequences. The high cost of not complying in the child welfare system means families can spend a substantial amount of time and money navigating complaints about their behavior, facing incredible stress and other psychological harm. Being labeled as noncompliant or uncooperative not only makes it difficult for kin to be perceived as a viable long-term placement but also affects their ability to stay with other friends and family members living in the same household. Once entangled in the child welfare system, kin face the possibility of removal of both the youth placed with them as well as any other children they might live with.

Central to this issue is the assumption that kin don't want to cooperate with the agency, when in reality, factors such as workplace demands, access to transportation, and other factors outside of their control may prevent kin from meeting every requirement. To counter this deeply rooted culture of compliance, kin-first child welfare agencies should move away from a model of unjust compliance to one of cooperation and collaboration. Two ways to encourage this shift is by offering families more accessible and flexible options for how to meet the demands of the system as well as offer them clear guidance for how to challenge unjust complaints made against them. Families have plenty of ways to "fail" within the system, yet lack an accessible and efficient appeals process to counter these complaints.

In general, a kin-first approach would adopt a strength-based culture—the opposite of deficit-based—which sees kin caregivers as protective, deserving of support, and collaborative partners in the child welfare system.

⁵¹ For more on the distinction between deserving and undeserving of support, see Zatz, N. (2012). [*Poverty Unmodified?: Critical Reflections on the Deserving/Undeserving Distinction*](#). UCLA Law Review.

Quote from the field

“We felt like we were constantly trying to prove that we were fit. We kept redoing our schedule and trying to do everything they asked. It took a long time for us to find our backbone and push back. [...] If you call us and ask us to take [youth] in, then we agree, [we] get inspected and we are under the microscope. The stuff they required went on and on and was way more than I ever expected since I was basically doing a good deed and I was treated like I was suspicious.”

- *Kin in Indiana*

Kin, first and foremost

Ultimately, doing justice to kin caregivers will require more than just ironing out the kinks of the kinship care system. It requires naming and tackling the deeply-ingrained beliefs and biases against kin caregivers. It requires seeing the hurdles kin have to overcome beyond the window into their lives that child welfare is privy to. It requires collaborating across sectors to alleviate the impossible choices kin have to make between meeting one basic need at the expense of another. It requires not isolating kin from the communities and support systems they need to provide care. It requires shifting away from demanding kin prove their fitness as caregivers to providing them with the support they need to thrive as caregivers. It requires viewing kin through a strengths-based lens, meeting them with a culture of care, and working to minimize the harm that the child welfare system may inflict on them.

As we stand on the cusp of a crucial moment for kinship care in this country presented by shifting federal regulation, we hope that these parting reflections will invite the readers of this report to not overlook the humans whose lives are upended, scrutinized, and judged for stepping up to ensure our youth are being raised by people they love and trust. We urge you to, first, hear their stories and, foremost, take them to heart and action.

Appendices

Appendix A. Research methodology

Research objectives

Our research objectives were to:

- Understand the experiences of youth and families as they relate to kinship care;
- Contextualize their perspectives against the practices that partner jurisdictions in California, Indiana, and New Hampshire deploy around kin search and engagement, kin approval and placement, kin licensing, kin support, and kin permanency; and
- Surface and share kin-first practices that can improve the experiences of youth and families and encourage kinship placements.

Research questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

- What practices have jurisdictions and/or services providers implemented that have demonstrated successful implementation of kin-first culture?
- Who do youth, families, and their communities consider to be “kin”?
- What do caseworkers, case supervisors, and other child welfare professionals consider when evaluating kin placement potential? How do these mental models differ from the policy definitions of and requirements for kin? And how do these mental models differ from community definitions of kin?
- What are the cultural, experiential, and institutional strengths and challenges of kinship care in California, Indiana, and New Hampshire?
- How do the partner jurisdictions handle kinship care processes, including any supporting operational and infrastructural structures, budgets and funding streams, caseworker and case supervisor teams and workload, management and reporting structures, statute restrictions, and the involvement of other actors (CASAs, GALs, child and family attorneys, etc.)?

Phase 1: Landscape review

A landscape review was conducted by the Think Of Us research and policy staff that reviewed gray and peer-reviewed literature available on kinship care frameworks and practices, both federally and at the state or county levels. Reviewed sources include:

- The [kinship checklist](#) and [kinship care Wiki How](#) developed by the Children Defense Fund, Generations United, and the ABA Center on Children and the Law;

- A Second Chance Inc.'s [Kinship Strengths Assessment](#) and [Standards for Assessing and Recognizing Kinship Strengths](#); and
- New America's Resource Family Working Group's 17 practices for [relative finding](#) and 6 practices for [relative licensing exceptions](#).

This landscape review was followed by a round of five subject matter expert interviews to surface kin-first initiatives and case studies nationwide. From the literature review and subject matter expert interviews, a compilation of kinship care practices and jurisdiction kinship care case studies was developed.

Phase 2: Field research

Research team

The research team was led by the Think Of Us research, policy, and community implementation staff, in close collaboration with Casey Family Programs and A Second Chance, Inc. The team collecting data consisted of representatives from all three organizations, including a research lead and researchers from Think Of Us, subject matter experts from Casey Family Programs and A Second Chance, Inc., lived experts from the [Ending the Need for Group Placements](#) workgroup, and a clinical social worker consultant. The team members embodied a combination of lived experience in child welfare, professional expertise in kinship care, training and specialization in trauma-responsive participatory research and facilitation, a prior crisis response or social work background, and a clinical background in mental health support.

Participant outreach and recruiting

For the recruitment of young people, parents, and kin caregivers, partner jurisdictions sought out participants through their own agency staff members and service providers. Jurisdictions used total enumerative sampling, a non-probability technique in which every subject meeting the criteria of inclusion is selected until the required sample size is achieved. The team asked the partner jurisdictions to select participants with an eye for diversity in racial/ethnic backgrounds and diversity in experiences with the kinship care process. For professionals (agency staff, service providers, and legal professionals), participants were recruited by partner jurisdictions through a convenience sampling approach, a non-probability technique that selects participants who are the easiest for the researchers to access, given their role in each jurisdiction. Jurisdictions were encouraged to host the research sessions in neutral and safe locations, such as community centers, libraries, or universities.

Research sessions and activities

The research team conducted a series of participatory workshops and semi-structured interviews with a range of participants to understand how the kinship care process works in these four jurisdictions as well as how participants in each jurisdiction would evaluate it.

This included:

- Participatory workshops with kin caregivers, parents, and youth (separately) to understand their mental models and experiences with kinship care;
- Individual semi-structured interviews with kin caregivers, parents, and youth to understand their mental models and experiences with kinship care;
- Participatory workshops with a range of agency staff (separating between supervisors and teams for participant comfort and ease of disclosure) to understand their mental models and experiences with kinship care;
- Individual semi-structured interviews with legal professionals, service providers and agency staff to understand their mental models and experiences with kinship care;
- Peer review of recommendations by lived experts from the Ending the Need for Group Placements workgroup who participated in field research.

Research participants

Across California, Indiana, and New Hampshire, a total of 124 research sessions with 529 research participants were conducted.

Number of research sessions and participants by jurisdiction

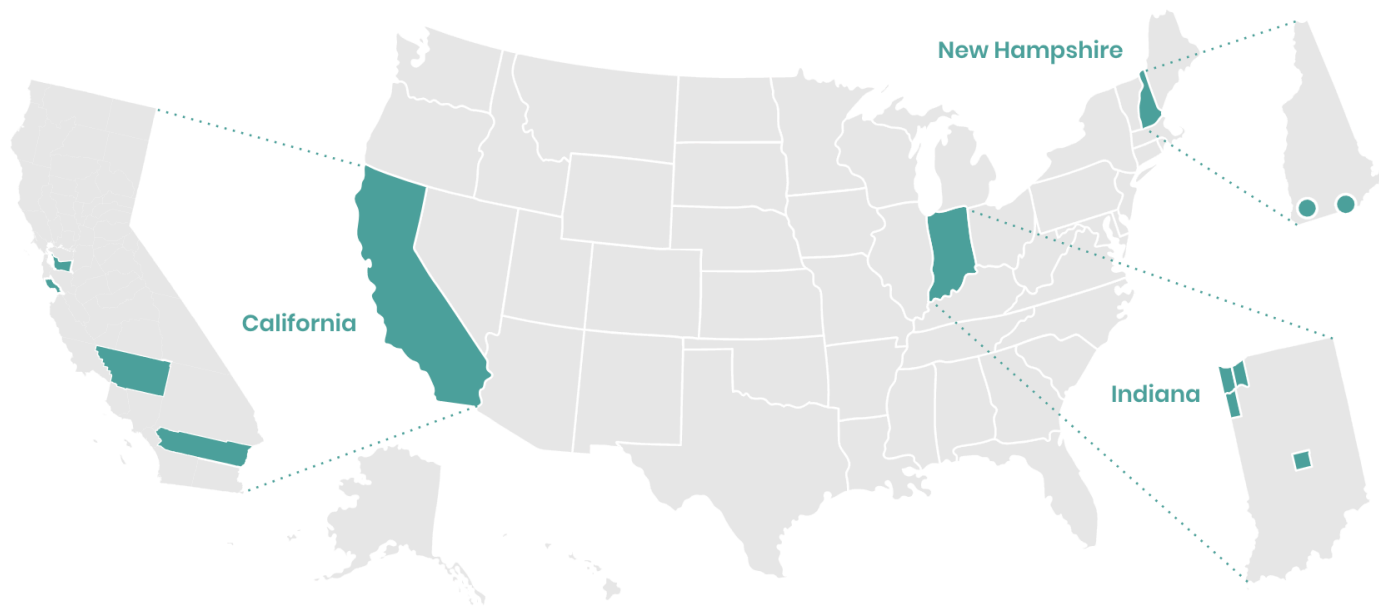
Stakeholder group	Research sessions				Research participants			
	CA	IN	NH	Total	CA	IN	NH	Total
Youth	4	4	4	12	56	34	6	96
Kin caregivers	6	5	4	15	53	51	14	118
Parents	5	1	3	9	33	1	7	41
Agency staff	8	13	9	30	65	54	21	140
Service providers	14	8	7	29	74	10	9	93
Legal professionals	8	10	11	29	18	12	11	41
Total	45	41	38	124	299	162	68	529

Research locations

The team conducted field research in three partner states, visiting the following research locations:

- California: Alameda, Kern, Riverside, and Santa Cruz counties.
- Indiana: Lake, Marion, Newton, and Porter counties.
- New Hampshire: Nashua and Keene cities.*

Research map



**Please note that while the New Hampshire field research activities took place in either Nashua or Keene, participants did not exclusively come from or work in those two locations, and reported experiences applicable to other jurisdictions and across the state of New Hampshire.*

Data synthesis

Throughout the data collection period, the research team conducted debriefs to surface and reflect on major learnings, as well as evaluate if there was a need to reframe the research questions or activities moving forward. After each field research engagement, the team systematically reviewed all research notes and audio transcripts to look for noteworthy data, quotes, opportunity areas, and preliminary themes and patterns emerging from the collected data. Subsequently, a more in-depth synthesis process was conducted where the team analyzed all notes and transcripts and generated insights across all jurisdictions. The team primarily used a grounded theory approach, a social sciences inductive reasoning methodology where collected primary research data is analyzed for repeated themes. These themes were then grouped into categories that became the basis for constructing new insights and structuring recommendations and opportunities.

During synthesis, all data was anonymized, and all identifying information was removed for all participants. Non-identifiable descriptors are sometimes used to provide context, but with care not to trace any information back to the participants, including with the de-identified direct quotes shared throughout this report. In select cases, quotes were edited for clarity, not substance.

Ethical review

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from Case Family Programs' Human Subjects Review Committee prior to Phase 1's subject matter expert interviews as well as for Phase 2's field research.

Trauma-responsive approach

The research team leveraged a number of trauma-responsive practices to ensure the well-being and emotional safety of research participants throughout the project. Recognizing the sensitivity of the research topic, these practices were designed to mitigate and respond to potential distress and cultivate a supportive environment for participants. These practices included:

- Enlisting the services of a clinical social worker consultant who was present throughout the research sessions;
- Compiling and distributing resource and referral packets that contained information localized to each research site around organizations providing mental health support, resources for survivors of violence, and essential services such as housing, food assistance, child care, and other basic necessities; and
- Offering self-care activities and sensory items designed to provide participants with opportunities for self-soothing, mindfulness, and somatic regulation during research sessions.

Finally, we employed a survivor-centered mandatory reporting protocol to center the agency of trauma survivors. We shared information about mandatory reporting laws and requirements relevant to each jurisdiction in the consent forms and in the beginning of the research session to ensure participants were aware of the legal requirements the research team was operating within, were able to make informed decisions about what to disclose, and were supported throughout the process.

Research limitations

Each research sprint occurred over a five day period during which the research team conducted fieldwork across two to four jurisdictions. This provided the research team with a short window of opportunity and finite number of engagements possible to speak with community members and professionals in each location.

In addition, participant recruitment was done through partner jurisdictions, which may have influenced who was invited to participate in the study, as well as the willingness or motivations of the participants who accepted.

Additionally, while this research has applications for tribal child welfare, this study was conducted focusing only on states and does not capture the critical nuance of how kinship care impacts tribes and tribal youth and families.

Finally, the study focused on understanding the direct experiences of participants and it is worth noting that the landscape review of existing literature was undertaken to identify kin-first practices and guide the development of research questions, not to influence the ultimate findings.

Appendix B. Acronyms and abbreviations

ACF	Administration for Children and Families
CA	California
CASA	Court Appointed Special Advocate
CDSS	California Department of Social Services
CFT	Child and Family Team
CWLA	Child Welfare League of America
CWS	Child Welfare Services
DCS	Department of Child Services (Indiana)
DCYF	Division for Children, Youth and Families (New Hampshire)
DUI	Driving Under the Influence
FASD	Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder
FCMP	Family Case Management Program
GAL	Guardian Ad Litem
GAP	Guardianship Assistance Program
ICPC	Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children
ICWA	Indian Child Welfare Act
IN	Indiana
ISFC	Intensive Services Foster Care
KGAP	Kinship Guardianship Assistance Program
NH	New Hampshire
NPRM	Notice of Proposed Rulemaking
RFA	Resource Family Approval
SSI	Supplemental Security Income
SSN	Social Security Number
SNAP	Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program
STRTP	Short-Term Residential Therapeutic Program
TANF	Temporary Assistance for Needy Families

Think of Us is a national nonprofit driving child welfare reform by partnering with impacted youth, families, and government leaders. We're a team of dedicated advocates, policy experts, and researchers working to center lived experience in child welfare decision-making, reduce unnecessary system entries, preserve families, and support youth transitioning out of care.